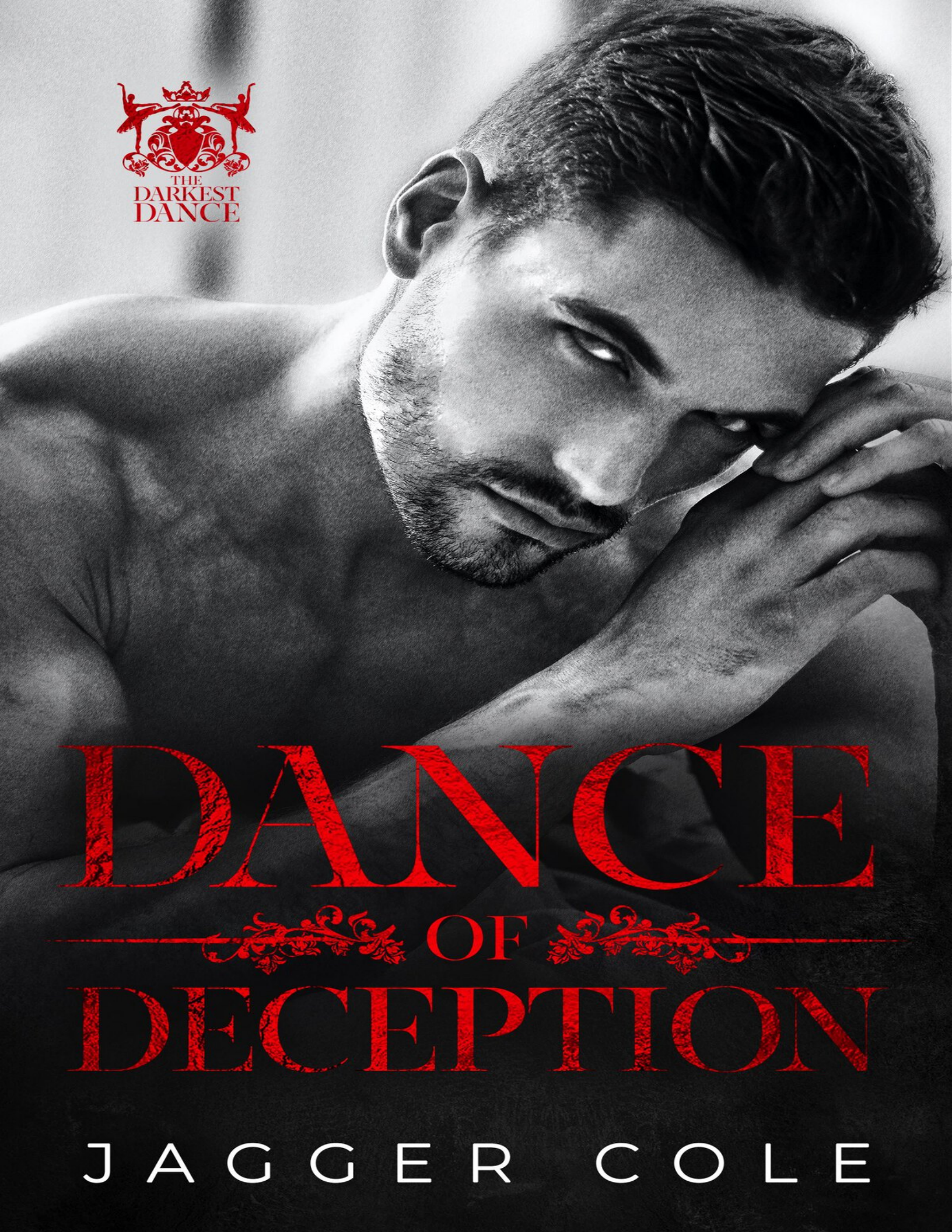

THE
DARKEST
DANCE
DANCE
OF
DECEPTION
JAGGER COLE

DANCE OF DECEPTION

A DARK FORCED MARRIAGE MAFIA ROMANCE

THE DARKEST DANCE

BOOK ONE

JAGGER COLE

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Morally Grey - April Jai
Brotsjór - Ólafur Arnalds
Bite Marks - TEYA
Diet Mountain Dew - dreamsoda
Unholy - Sam Smith, Kim Petras
Cross - Echos
The Black - Imminence
Swan Lake (Suite), Op. 20a Swan Theme - Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Play With Fire - Sam Tinnesz, Yacht Money
Tear You Apart - She Wants Revenge
Gasoline - Måneskin
Chills - Mickey Valen, Joey Myron
World On Fire - Thirty Seconds To Mars
Hemorrhage (In My Hands) - JPOLND

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TRIGGER WARNING

Dear Reader,

This book contains darker themes and depictions of past trauma and SA, as well as very graphic scenes involving CNC, primal, impact-play, and somno activities.

While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. *Please* know your own triggers, and read with that in mind.

Thanks for reading,

Jagger

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1

LYRA

BALLET ISN'T ART. It's war disguised as grace.

"Again."

Every muscle in my body is on the point of collapse, but Madame Kuzmina doesn't care. She sits in her seat, dead center, four rows back from the stage, watching us like a hawk from the shadows beyond the lights, her fingers steepled under her chin.

Vaughn exhales sharply beside me, his jaw clenched. Brooklyn doesn't bother holding back her groan. She collapses forward, hands on her knees, sucking in air like we've just run a marathon.

"We've done it four fucking times already," she mutters under her breath.

Madame Kuzmina raises a single hand, glittering with rings, in a regal motion. She doesn't need to raise her voice. Her stare alone is enough to suffocate.

"And now you will do it a fifth," she says quietly in her Russian-tinged accent, "because the fourth was fucking *garbage*."

Vaughn and I exchange a glance. His crystal blue eyes flicker with amusement, but I don't return the smile. I'm too exhausted.

There's no crying in baseball. And there sure as *shit* isn't any smiling in ballet.

Brooklyn straightens with a sigh, smoothing a hand over her leotard. “Fifth time’s the charm?” she mutters.

We begin again, running through the *pas de trois*. My mind goes blank the way it always does when I dance—nothing but the music and the movement. Vaughn’s hands on my waist, firm but controlled, lifting me effortlessly. Brooklyn spinning into position beside us.

We run through the *entire* thing again before hitting our end position perfectly, Brooklyn and I on either side of Vaughn, and for the first time tonight, Madame Kuzmina doesn’t tell us to do it again.

Instead, she nods.

Once.

“That will do. For now.”

I hide the relief washing over me in a wave. Vaughn lets go of our hands with a dramatic groan, then flops onto his back at center stage, staring up at the ornate ceiling.

“Ballet is a fucking disease,” he announces to the air.

Brooklyn rolls her eyes and nudges his leg with her foot. “At least you get to wear flats.”

“Trust me, princess, you do not want to see me on pointe.”

Despite my exhaustion, I smile. Vaughn is chaos wrapped in infuriatingly incredible talent. When he's dancing, he moves with an effortless grace. Off stage he’s all sharp edges and wild energy, a stray dog that’s never been fully domesticated.

Madame Kuzmina rises to her feet, rearranging the silk draped over her arms. “We begin again at nine tomorrow. Arrive warmed up and ready to go.”

With that, she wraps her shawl around herself like Maleficent’s robes and melts up the darkened aisle of the Mercury Opera House, disappearing into the shadows. There’s a brief flicker of light as the door to the lobby opens and then closes again.

Naomi appears at the edge of the stage, twirling her water bottle in one hand and nodding in the direction Madame Kuzmina has gone. “Such a ray of fucking sunshine,” she deadpans.

Vaughn rolls onto his stomach. “And yet she loves me.”

Brooklyn snorts. “She tolerates you.”

Vaughn winks, pushing himself up. “Tolerates, loves, same difference.”

I shake my head and turn toward the wings, heading for the dressing room. My legs ache, and even my skin feels tired. I need a hot shower and about fourteen hours of sleep.

The dressing room is empty, since the rehearsal day was done long ago. But Madame decided to focus her keen eye on Brooklyn, Vaughn, and I and had us stay late, since we’re the ones performing the pas de trois in *Swan Lake*, which the Zakharova will be performing in a few months' time.

Naomi follows me in, already undoing her bun. She’s our Odette/Odile, aka, Swan Queen, for the upcoming performance. And her reason for staying late has nothing to do with Madame Kuzmina and everything to do with *herself*.

No matter how many times you tell Naomi she’s amazing, she refuses to listen. I swear, the girl drinks imposter syndrome smoothies for breakfast.

“Tell me you’re coming out with us this weekend,” she coaxes, leaning against her locker. “Or are you going to pretend you have an exciting social life when we both know you don’t?”

I smirk. “Tempting, but I need sleep more than overpriced cocktails.”

As if I could *afford* overpriced cocktails. Or reasonably priced ones. Actually, even happy hour pricing might be off the table given my current financial situation.

Naomi groans. “You’re such a grandma.”

Brooklyn drops onto the bench beside me. “I might actually be dead by the weekend,” she mutters. “Kuzmina is a fucking sadist.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is *Russian.*” Naomi grins.

Vaughn appears in the doorway, shoving his fingers through his shaggy dark hair. “Personally, I like my women with a touch of organized crime.”

Brooklyn makes a face. “You would. And get *out*, dude. Guys' dressing room is down the hall, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“But I get so lonely all by myself.” He grins smugly before he peels off his t-shirt and slings it over his shoulder.

Vaughn has the sort of body that can only be described as “sinful”. The motherfucker has like zero percent body fat, is freaking *ripped*, and is covered in strategically placed tattoos. Coupled with his Mediterranean skin tone and vaguely Italian looks, it’s easy to see why his social calendar is perpetually filled—with dates with both sexes, I should add.

Vaughn strolls over to a locker and opens it before he turns to wink at Brooklyn. “You know I keep a second locker with my shit in here. And relax, it’s not like any of you are my type.”

He starts to take off his tights. Yeah, that’s my cue to turn around and avert my eyes. Sinful body or not, Vaughn's and my relationship—pretty much his relationship with any of the girls in the company—is more sibling-like than anything else.

Brooklyn snorts as she peels off her own tights and leotard and replaces them with underwear and yoga pants.

“I thought that your ‘type’ was ‘has a pulse and at least one willing hole’.”

“Pulses are overrated,” he grins.

“*Dude*,” Brooklyn makes sour face and shakes her head.

Vaughn laughs as he turns around, now at least wearing boxers. “Like you’d ever let me near you, baby girl.”

Brooklyn wrinkles her nose as she tosses on a hoodie. “Gross?”

Vaughn shrugs. “The feeling is mutual, and I say that with love. No, what I mean is, I don’t play hard to get. If someone doesn’t want me, I’m already

gone. You want this…?”

The three of us collectively roll our eyes as he runs a finger down his ludicrously defined abs and cups his dick through his boxers.

“You have to show me you want it.”

“Yeah, hard pass, *friendo*,” Brooklyn says dryly.

“Again, the feeling is entirely mutual, baby girl.”

I giggle, turning to haul my dance bag out of my locker. I wriggle out of my leotard and wrap a towel around myself getting ready to shower, then dig through the bag, fingers searching for my MetroCard. But all I find are a few loose quarters and a crumpled one-dollar bill.

Shit. Not enough for the subway home.

I press my lips together and force the knot of frustration down.

I reach for my water bottle, catching my reflection in the mirror hanging on the inside of the locker door. My brow furrows, my gaze lingering on the way my collarbones are more prominent than they were a few months ago.

“Here.”

I jolt, turning at the sound of Naomi’s voice. She doesn’t make a big deal out of it, but passes me a granola bar.

“I’m good.”

My friend cocks one brow. “I don’t want it,” she says evenly. “So—take it.” Her eyes stay on mine. “And *eat it*,” she adds quietly.

I smile wryly as I peel open the wrapper, taking a small nibble. Naomi doesn’t know everything about my life, but she knows enough to see when things are…slipping.

Like me, Naomi is making it work by herself on her dancer's salary, somehow. The difference is, she’s got a safety net if she *really* needs it. You’d have to stick a gun to her head before she'd call her congressman father to ask for help. But the option is there.

For me, it's not. My safety net was gone long before the monster who was my father bled out in a prison cell.

Brooklyn and Vaughn are talking loudly about Kir Nikolayev, the very enigmatic Bratva kingpin who owns and bankrolls the Zakharova Ballet… specifically, how “fuckable” he is…when Naomi and I leave them and trudge to the showers.

The ache of the extra-long day melts just a little as the hot water pours down over me.

“Hey… You’re good, right?”

I turn to glance over at Naomi, who’s rinsing off at the next showerhead.

I know what she means.

“Yeah, I’m…fine.”

She pushes her long, dark hair out of her face and gives me a piercing look. “For real?”

I exhale. “Yeah, it’s just…” I shake my head. “I’m starting to wonder if school on top of this is too much.”

Between the credits I got for advanced classes in high school, and the college courses I took a few years ago, I’m about two-thirds of the way to a degree in human psychology. The lofty goal is that when ballet eventually ends—whenever that is—I’ll try my luck at the MCATs and med school, and try to become a clinical psychiatrist.

Hey, I *did* say “lofty”.

Naomi exhales as she turns to rinse off her back. “Yeah, pre-med *does* sound like a lot on top of this, even part time.” She glances at me, her brow still cocked. “Is that all?”

Goddammit, this girl always sees right through me.

“Vera’s been gambling again.”

She groans. “Are you fucking serious? I thought your mom was banned from every casino and racetrack in the state.”

“Yeah, well, she must’ve found *someone* who lets her place bets through them.”

“Shit.” Naomi frowns. “Look, I know you hate—”

“We’ll be fine,” I smile as I turn the water off. “But thanks for the offer.”

She nods, not pushing it.

Vaughn and Brooklyn are already dressed and somehow *still* talking about Kir’s “big dick energy” when we get back from the showers. I pull on yoga pants and a hoodie before I remember the lack of means to get home tonight. I wince as I glance at Naomi.

“Hey, you wouldn’t have a spare MetroCard on you, would you?”

Naomi’s eyes flick toward my bag, where the pitiful collection of change still sits in the front pocket. She doesn’t comment on it, just reaches into her wallet and pulls out her MetroCard, pressing it into my palm.

“Just take it. I’ll grab a cab with Vaughn.”

“Are you sure?”

She snorts. “Yeah, because I *love* the subway at midnight.” She shoulders her dance bag and gives me a pointed look. “Text me when you get home, please.”

Vaughn stretches dramatically, slinging an arm around Naomi’s shoulders as he leads her toward the door. “My chariot awaits, milady.” He sticks a cigarette between his lips, making Naomi squint.

“You light that thing anywhere near me and I’m going to knee you in the balls.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time, girl.”

The door swings shut behind them, leaving only silence.

Brooklyn is still sitting on the bench, one leg tucked under her, absentmindedly running a finger over the edge of her pointe shoe ribbon. The tension in her body from the exhausting rehearsal has shifted to something else.

She doesn’t look at me when she finally speaks.

“You ever think about how much this actually costs us?”

I frown as I throw my gingery-red hair into a messy bun. “What? Ballet?”

She exhales sharply, shaking her head. “Not just ballet. This life. The work, all the training, the barely-there paycheck.” She glances at me, one brow lifting. “We kill ourselves every day for what? The honor of being underpaid and having a career that's over before it's even begun?”

Brooklyn’s like me: making her dance dream work on her own. No safety net.

I don’t answer right away. Truth is, I have thought about it. Every single time I pull together enough cash for rent but not groceries. Every time I ache all over but know I’ll still be back at the barre the next morning.

Brooklyn clears her throat. “Look, I understand pride, Lyra. And I’m not going to insult you by asking if you want a loan or anything. But…” The corners of her lips curl as she reaches into her bag.

My jaw drops as she pulls out a *gangster*-sized wad of cash.

“If you *do* need money…”

I blink at the thick stack of crisp hundreds, folded neatly. More cash than I’ve seen in…ever.

“What the fuck, Brooklyn?”

She smirks. “Relax. I didn’t rob a bank.”

I tear my gaze away from the money, forcing my voice to stay level. “Then where…?”

She exhales slowly. “Remember that charity thing where we did that excerpt from *Giselle* last month?”

Occasionally, mostly because it *always* results in new benefactors with deep pockets, select members of the company will perform at things like the Policemen’s Ball or other charity events.

Brooklyn clears her throat. “Well, after we were done, this guy came up to me and said he had a dance gig I might be interested in. He said he couldn’t tell me much about it, but that it paid insanely well. And… I took it. That’s where this money came from.”

A strange prickle works its way down my spine.

Brooklyn must notice the change on my face, because she quickly shakes her head. “Look, it’s not stripping or anything. No one touches you—no one even speaks to you. And you’re wearing clothes. But it pays way better than this.” She gestures vaguely around us at the dressing room. “It’s also secret.”

The word makes something inside me tighten.

Secret is never good. Secret always comes at a price.

“What do you mean, *secret*?”

Brooklyn twists the ends of her hoodie strings around her finger. “It’s like a private club or something. They pick you up at a location they decide, blindfold you, and drive you there.”

My jaw drops.

“Are you fucking serious? Brooklyn, that’s super sketch!”

She huffs a quiet laugh. “Yeah, I thought so too, at first.”

I narrow my eyes. “*At first*?”

She shrugs. “It wasn’t as bad as I thought. You change in a dressing room, where the blindfold comes off. There were six other girls—all dancers.”

“And then?”

Brooklyn exhales, her voice quieter now. “They give us fresh blindfolds, masks, and earbuds that play music synced with a voice directing us. Someone took us all out to a performance space, and—we danced.”

I don’t like how that makes my skin prickle.

“For how many people?”

She shakes her head. “No idea. I never saw them. Never heard them. But they were there, I could feel it.”

I swallow thickly.

What the fuck.

She holds up the wad of money, her brow cocking significantly. “Lyra, they pay five fucking grand for *four hours*.”

My stomach lurches.

Five. Thousand. Dollars.

That’s rent, food, security. That’s a way out from the hole my mother seems to be completely hellbent on in digging us into.

Brooklyn watches me carefully. “Listen… again, I get pride, Lyra. But I saw you counting coins…” She lifts her shoulders. “They said they might be looking for more dancers. So if you wanted…”

I shiver, feeling the invitation linger between us like a lit fuse. I swallow, eying the money in her hand.

“Look, for now…” She hands me two twenties. “Will you just take a cab home? Seriously, the subway is dangerous this late. Please? And if you’re interested in the job… Here's the number for my contact.” She finds an entry on her phone and texts it to me.

Pride wants me to refuse the money politely.

Common sense and the prospect of spending hours underground with my fingers wrapped around my keys wins out.

“Thanks,” I say quietly, taking the money. “Seriously, thank you. I’ll pay you back.”

* * *

THE NIGHT AIR IS CRISP, biting at my skin as I pull my hoodie tighter around me.

“Wanna just share my Uber?” Brooklyn nods at the car waiting at the top of the alley behind the theater.

I exhale. “Maybe, actually.” I shoot her a wry smile. “I feel like you’re pampering me tonight.”

She giggles. “I mean, *yeah*. You’re my girl. C’mon.”

I start to follow her. When I slip my hand into my hoodie pocket, I groan.

“Shit.”

Brooklyn glances back. “What’s up?”

My face droops. “I left my phone in the dressing room.” I shake my head. “You know what? Go ahead. You already gave me money for a cab. I’ll just do that.”

She frowns. “Don’t be silly. I’ll wait for you.”

“Nah, go get your ride. It’s late. But thanks. And…for earlier.”

“Anytime, girl. See you tomorrow for more Russian gulag conditioning?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I groan.

I watch as she tugs her coat around herself, scampers up the alley, and slips into the waiting vehicle, red taillights disappearing into the night.

The door hisses shut behind me as I duck back into the warmth of the dim, silent ballet theater. My steps are quick as I make my way toward the dressing room.

It only takes a minute to find my phone and I stuff it into my hoodie pocket, shaking my head before slipping back outside.

This time, the door clicks shut behind me with finality.

The street is mostly empty now, the occasional honk of a distant car the only sound. The alley behind the Mercury splits halfway up to the street: continuing straight puts you onto Madison Avenue, which runs one-way north: perfect for Brooklyn, who lives up toward Harlem. But if I take the left-handed side-cut out of the alley, it’ll dump me on East 49th Street,

where it's easier to get a cab going *downtown*, to the apartment I, unfortunately, share with my mother in Hell's Kitchen.

I ignore the creepy sensation that being here at midnight always brings as I hustle up the alley. I'm just about to turn the corner and head out to East 49th when I hear voices.

Low. Rough. Male.

I freeze.

The words are hushed, but I can still hear them. A weird shiver ripples up my spine as I do.

"What are you doing here? Bianca got out of rehearsal hours ago."

The first voice is rough-sounding, deep, and somewhat frightening, with a dangerous edge to it.

My stomach knots at Bianca's name.

Bianca got out of rehearsal hours ago.

Bianca as in Bianca Barone—well, Bianca *Drakos* now that she's married—who's in the Zakharova with me. She's an *incredible* dancer, super sweet, and is the youngest daughter in the Barone Italian mafia family.

I suck in a breath, pressing my back against the brick wall, forcing myself deeper into the shadows.

"No shit. I'm not here for her," a second man growls. "What are *you* doing here, you psycho?" His voice is deep and dark, too, but also edged in something savage and viciously alluring, like a blade dragging down my spine or a dark promise whispered in my ear.

The first guy exhales sharply, irritated. "It was stupid and reckless for Matteo to hire her."

My pulse hammers.

Her who?

“She dances *here*,” the first guy growls. “She’s friends with people like your sister. She could talk—”

“She was blindfolded, you dumb fuck,” the second man snaps. “And just what was your plan, exactly?”

The first man huffs out a breath. “I was just going to scare her a little,” he rumbles. “Remind her that the money she was paid ensures silence.”

Something inside me goes cold as things fall into place. I’m pretty sure they’re talking about *Brooklyn.*

The second man’s voice sharpens. “Stay the fuck away from where my sister dances, understand?”

There’s a tense, prolonged pause.

“Fine.” A slow exhale, like a forced truce.

“Is that a *yes* fine, or an *I’m blowing smoke up your ass* fine.”

“It’s a yes fine, calm down,” the first guy grunts. “Anyway, in unrelated news, Mushkin hasn’t responded to our summons.”

The second guy—the one with authority in his voice, the one who's driving the conversation—lets out a dark chuckle. “People rarely actually respond to a Black Court summons.”

I shrink further against the wall.

“They respond in behavior, at least,” the first guy mutters. “Mushkin hasn’t hired more security, fled, moved money. None of it. His schedule is still clear for the night of the trial, though.”

“You know how it is,” the second guy says, his voice smoother now. “Sometimes they’re so confident that they show up willingly.”

The first guy laughs, low and dark. “And if not…” He pauses, amusement dripping from his voice. “Then we get the fun of hunting them down before we even get to the chase.”

A slow shiver slides down my spine.

“Reach out to The Wolf and The Stag,” the second man orders. “Let them know the status on Mushkin. The Black Court will meet as planned.”

The Wolf? The Stag?

The *Black Court*?

Nothing about this conversation makes sense.

The sound of footsteps grows louder. They’re splitting up. I panic, pressing myself deeper into the shadows, willing my body to melt into the cold brick.

Then I flinch, freezing in place as a figure rounds the corner and suddenly looms over me.

Tall. Menacing. Powerful.

Suddenly, I’m looking straight into the cold, piercing blue eyes of Carmine Barone.

My stomach drops.

I’ve seen him before—either dropping off or picking up Bianca, or sometimes at performances or some of those charity events. But this is different.

Up close, he’s even more intense than he is at a distance. This near, he radiates raw power—and something darker, coiled beneath the surface, waiting to strike like a lethal, venomous snake. He’s wearing a dark suit and an open pea-coat, molded to his broad shoulders and powerful arms like a suit of armor.

It’s like black lightning striking from the shadows. Before I can even blink, his hand is suddenly on my throat, his fingers wrapping around it and settling against my jugular. It’s not a choke—just a warning. A display of his strength. His power.

His control.

My breath catches.

“I—I didn’t hear anything,” I whisper, the words tumbling out too fast, too desperate.

His grip tightens slightly but he says nothing for a moment, those cold blue eyes piercing into me like knives, as if he’s flaying open my very soul to peer inside and feast on what he finds.

His thumb traces over my pulse. “No one asked you about anything you may or may not have heard.”

A tremor ripples through my body, my eyes widening even further.

“Who *are* you?” he finally murmurs darkly, his voice low, focused, and almost sensual in the way it teases over my skin.

My heart thunders in my chest and my throat works against his hand.

“N-nobody,” I whisper again. “I’m nobody.”

Carmine’s lips curl, something between a smirk and a snarl.

“Nobody…” he muses.

His grip lingers, his fingers still firm around my throat, pressing just enough that I can feel the subtle pressure against my pulse. A test. A game.

A reminder that he could crush me if he wanted to.

His thumb moves slightly, stroking the base of my throat like he’s considering something. My skin burns where he touches me, body locked in place, muscles coiled tight. I don’t flinch. I don’t dare.

His head tilts, studying me like I’m something strange and unexpected.

“What did you hear?” His voice is a low rasp.

I shake my head as much as his grip allows. “Nothing,” I breathe.

Carmine hums, unconvinced. “Nothing?”

I gulp. “I-I was just leaving the theater. I didn’t—I wasn’t paying attention.”

His grip tightens for a second, just enough to make my pulse spike against his hand before he eases up again. “Funny,” he murmurs. “People who’ve

heard nothing don't usually look this scared."

I open my mouth, then close it again, forcing my breathing to stay even. He's testing me, waiting to see if I'll break.

I can't do that.

Men like him eat weakness for breakfast.

My fingers clench into fists at my sides. "You… You startled me, is all."

"If this is *startled*, I'd love to see what it looks like when you're *truly* scared."

He says it like a desire. Like he's already thinking about getting off to the idea of my fear.

Carmine watches me for a beat longer. Then, finally, he lets go. I suck in a breath, my skin prickling where his hand was on my throat, the ghost of his touch lingering like a brand.

He takes a slow step back, his sharp blue gaze never leaving mine.

"Well, Miss Nobody who heard nothing," he murmurs, his lips curling into an amused and cruel almost-smile. "Let's hope it stays that way."

And then, just as quickly as he appeared, he's gone, and the alley is silent once more.

The air feels heavy, charged, like the ghost of him is still standing there, watching me.

I don't move. I don't breathe.

Then my legs finally unlock and I'm able to stumble forward, pulse still hammering, his words pressing heavily on my spine and dragging over my skin like hot knives.

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2

LYRA

I'M SHAKING as I stare out the window of the cab, watching the darkened buildings whiz past. My breath is still uneven, knuckles white and fingers curled tightly around the strap of my dance bag.

We'd never met before tonight. But I know who Carmine Barone is. *Everyone* does. The heir to the Barone family. Bianca's older brother.

I knew he was mafia, but holy fucking hell, I didn't know he was this dark malevolent force, or whatever the hell that was back there.

A leering, looming shadow.

An all-consuming blackness.

There was something so sinister about him, and it wasn't just the mafia angle. It was like a darkness, bubbling like molten tar just beneath his perfect exterior.

The way he wrapped his hand around my throat and stroked my pulse as he studied me—it wasn't just dominance. That was something much darker.

If this is startled, I'd love to see what it looks like when you're truly *scared.*

I pull my hoodie tighter around me.

Again, it was like he was *getting off* on my terror.

Like a psychopath.

I should be thinking about the grocery money I don’t have. The rent that’s due. My mother, who I can almost guarantee is passed out drunk on the couch again, or if she's awake is ready with a fresh round of biting words and bitter resentment.

Instead, all I can think about is the press of Carmine’s rough palm against my throat, the way his eyes lingered. How my pulse thrummed against his skin.

He liked that.

I exhale sharply, shaking my head. *Get out of your head, girl*.

I force my gaze down to my lap and my wallet sitting there, then up to the meter on the cab. My dumb pride still wants to tell Brooklyn thanks but no thanks. But pride has a way of taking a back seat to hunger and desperation. Mercifully, she slid me enough money for *two* cab rides. That solves my hunger problem for the evening and probably the next few days, if I can stretch it.

“Here’s good, thanks,” I murmur to the driver as we get to the 24-hour corner bodega a block away from my building. I pay him and slip out of the cab, slamming the door behind me.

The street is mostly deserted at this hour. I turn toward the familiar glow of Francisco’s, shoving my hands into my hoodie pocket and already making a mental list of the basics I can grab.

Bread. Instant ramen. Maybe some canned soup?

The bell over the door jingles as I step inside. The bodega is warm and smells like stale coffee and overripe fruit. I nod at Francisco behind the counter, a man too old and tired to care about anything except making sure nobody steals from him.

I grab a basket and head toward the shelves.

I don’t notice the man standing at the end of the aisle, blocking my exit, until it’s too late.

My chest tightens. He’s not someone I recognize, but there’s something off about the way he's staring at me with such focused intensity.

Not this again. Please. I thought these psychos were done with me.

I grip the basket tighter. “Excuse me…”

He doesn’t move.

“How did you not know?” His voice is quiet, but the steel in it is unmistakable.

I go still.

“What?”

His head tips slightly, dark eyes burning into mine. “*How the fuck did you not know the girls were down there, Lyra*?”

The ground tilts beneath me.

A rush of cold sweeps through my limbs, my grip tightening even more on the basket. “I don’t—” I shake my head, taking a step back. “I think you have me confused with—”

He takes a step forward. I step back again, the metal shelves biting into my spine.

“You *covered* for him,” the man mutters, voice shaking with rage. “The Truth Report says it’s got new information that you *covered* for that motherfucker.”

A buzzing starts in my ears, drowning out the sound of the flickering overhead fluorescent light, the hum of the refrigerator case behind me.

Not here. Not now.

“I’m sorry,” I say, forcing steel into my voice. “Whatever you’re looking for, you won't find it here.”

The man’s lips curl into a sneer.

Then I see the knife, glinting in his hand.

My pulse skyrockets and I drop the basket. It clatters to the floor, cans rolling across the tile, but I don’t care. I turn, shoving past him, my breath coming in quick bursts.

He grabs my wrist.

“My sister,” he hisses. “Her name was Jordana Hodgkins.”

I wrench my arm free, heart pounding against my ribs.

His sister.

Oh, God.

“Stay the fuck away from me,” I snap, barely recognizing my own voice. I stumble back, knocking into a display of energy drinks, sending them crashing to the floor.

The sudden sound startles Francisco behind the counter. “Hey! What the hell—”

I don’t wait. I bolt for the door, shoving it open so hard the bell nearly tears from the frame.

Run.

I sprint down the block, shoes slamming on the pavement, the cold air slicing into my lungs.

I can hear him following me.

I don’t look back. I don’t stop.

I’m already jamming my hand into my pocket and feeling for my keys as I round the corner, my apartment building in sight. I grab the front door handle, jam in the keys and yank hard, bursting into the dim lobby.

I slam the door shut behind me, the lock clicking into place. Then I whirl, pushing through the door to the stairwell, my hands shaking as I grip the railing, my legs barely carrying me up the first few steps.

I don’t go straight to my apartment.

Instead, I sink down on the stairs, curling my knees into my chest, my pulse still pounding, bile rising in my throat.

Jordana Hodgkins.

Her name echoes in my head along with his other victims.

I try to shove the memory back into its cage but it breaks free, slamming into me with the force of a tidal wave.

The girl with the haunted eyes. The ugly bruises, the dirty chains. The *smell*. The sheer, abject horror.

I gag, shoving my fist to my mouth to keep from making a sound.

Arkadi, my father, is dead. He was killed in prison four months ago. But the ghosts he left behind are still screaming for the vengeance they never got and never *will* truly get.

I squeeze my eyes shut, my forehead pressed against my knees. People like Jordana's brother will never believe I didn't know. The world decided my guilt a long time ago.

The tabloid reporters. The clickbait conspiracy theorists like The Truth Report spouting their ludicrous theories online to increase their view counts, claiming that I had to have been involved. Saying that I knew. That I turned a blind eye. Or worst of all, that I *helped*.

It makes me want to scream until I can't scream anymore.

No matter what I say, there will always be people who believe I belonged in that prison cell, too.

And sometimes, when the nightmares claw their way into my head, when I wake up drenched in sweat, a scream lodged in my throat—

I wonder if they're right.

I force the memories away, burying them deep, where they belong, and stand.

The stairwell is silent except for the dull creak of my weight shifting on the warped wooden steps. My body is still wired, my pulse running too high,

but exhaustion is starting to settle in now, weighing down my limbs. I just need to make it inside, lock the door, and go to bed.

I take the stairs to our fourth-floor apartment, clenching the railing, barely aware of how my hands shake. My heart hasn't settled since the bodega, since I heard that man's voice twisted with rage when he said her name.

Jordana Hodgkins.

Daniela Garcia.

Kerri Ayers.

Pamela Gill.

Yolanda Gonzales.

Sophia Ferguson.

I get to our floor before I can possibly finish listing all the names forever burned into my psyche.

The hall light flickers weakly as I approach the door. The paint is peeling, the number is slightly crooked, and the faint scent of cigarette smoke mixed with something vaguely chemical hangs in the air. I brace myself before unlocking the door, already knowing what's waiting on the other side.

As soon as I push the door open, the smell of cheap vodka slams into me.

Vera is exactly how I expected—sprawled out on the couch in her ratty bathrobe, the television muttering some late-night talk show in the background. A glass sits half-full in her hand, the neck of the bottle within easy reach on the coffee table.

She barely glances at me, her gaze flicking up just long enough to take in my disheveled appearance before returning to the TV. "It's late."

I get that almost *everyone* has a complex relationship with their mother. But I'm willing to bet mine takes the prize.

It's not *just* that she's got a drinking problem. It's not *only* that she's a gambling addict, a textbook narcissist, and what pretty much any psychologist would label as "emotionally abusive." It's that—and I know

this is going to sound dramatic, but it's true—I have never, *ever* felt a single drop of "motherly love" from her.

Not once.

She didn't outright neglect me as a child, of course. I was fed. I had clothes and a roof over my head. But parental affection? Snuggles? Being told I was loved?

It's just not in her DNA. It used to bother me more. Or maybe I've just grown numb to it over the years.

And yes, I ask myself *all the fucking time* why it is that after an entire childhood of getting the cold shoulder from her, I've found myself letting her live with me the last two years.

I still don't really have an answer.

Maybe we're just stuck with family for life, even family like Vera. Maybe I'm still holding out hope that one day, she'll wake up and change.

But apparently, that day is not today.

I exhale, shutting the door behind me. "Rehearsal ran late."

Vera snorts, shifting in her seat. "Re-hear-sal," she repeats, like the word itself is funny. "Right. All that time dancing—tell me, when does it start paying the bills?"

I don't answer. There's no point. We've had this conversation so many times.

I drop my bag next to the door, my muscles screaming for rest as I roll my shoulders. All I want is to go to my room, lock the door, and collapse into bed for a few hours before I wake up and do it all over again tomorrow.

"What's wrong?"

My brow furrows as I glance over at my mom. "What?"

"What's *wrong*," she slurs. "You've got a look on your face."

I shake my head. "I'm just tired."

“Lyra.”

I make the mistake of hesitating, just for a second.

“*Tell me*,” she insists, peering at me with alcohol-numbed but viciously focused eyes.

I exhale slowly. “Some guy recognized me,” I say, the words falling out before I can pull them back in. “Just now, at the bodega on the corner.”

Vera doesn’t react at first. Her glass hovers near her lips, the vodka sloshing against the rim as she sways slightly in her seat. Then, she sniffs and takes a slow sip, her bleary gaze shifting to me.

“Recognized you?”

“From the trial.” The word tastes bitter.

Vera’s eyes sharpen in a way I haven’t seen for a long time, cutting through the haze of alcohol. Her lips twist into a sneering smirk and she lets out a bitter laugh, shaking her head.

“Of course he did,” she mutters. “Who was he? One of those cocksucking reporters? Another vulture?”

My gaze drops to my hands. “Chris Hodgkins.”

I remembered the name on my way upstairs. I recall seeing him outside the courtroom during those manic, fever-dream days. I also recall the biting, ruthless interview he gave to the press following my dad’s sentencing, vowing to ‘make sure Arkadi’s accomplices see justice too’.”

Vera’s brow’s knit. “Who?” she grunts.

“Jordana Hodgkins’ brother.”

My mother scowls. “I don't know who the hell that—”

“She’s one of the girls your husband raped and murdered,” I blurt coldly.

The room goes quiet. My mother’s eyes narrow on me, her lips pursing.

“All those cops, the lawyers, the goddamn reporters. They twisted it. Turned you against him.”

I groan, turning away.

It’s not the first time I’ve heard Mom’s insane version of history, especially when she’s shitfaced like this. But I don’t have it in me tonight to listen.

“Mom—”

“God knows Arkadi wasn’t perfect,” she scoffs. “I knew he had his girls on the side. I wasn’t happy about it, but I wasn’t gonna throw him in prison for life for a bunch of shit they made up just because I was mad at—”

“Oh my *God*, Mom,” I hurl back. “*Enough*! He didn’t go to prison for cheating on you! He went to prison because—”

“Because you put him there!” she screeches, lurching to her feet and splashing her drink all over the place. “Because those fuckers got to you and turned you against your own father! You stood up there in that courtroom, all high and mighty, and ran your mouth,” she spits, her voice thick with scorn. “Cried your little crocodile tears and told them everything they wanted to hear. Gave them *everything* they needed to put him away.”

Tears sting the corners of my eyes. “I told the *truth*.”

Vera’s laugh is sharp, cutting. “Yeah. And look where that got you.” She spreads her arms wide, gesturing to the shabby apartment around us. “Look where it got *me*.”

I shake my head, turning away. There’s no use arguing. There never is.

“Good night, Vera.”

But before I can take a step, there’s a loud, heavy knock on the door.

My mom stiffens slightly, her grip tightening around her glass.

The knock comes again, harder this time.

My stomach knots. A knock on the door at five minutes to midnight is never a good thing.

Vera sets her drink down on the coffee table, rubbing her face. “Jesus Christ,” she mutters. “Who the hell is banging like that at—”

The next knock isn’t a knock. It’s a fist, slamming heavy and impatient against the door.

Mom tightens the belt of her robe and crosses the room slowly, stepping barefoot over the scuffed wood floor, leaning in, pressing an ear to the door. “Who is it?”

There’s silence.

But then suddenly, the door shudders violently when someone slams into it.

I jolt back instinctively. Vera stumbles away from the door, her face twisting in shock as the lock bends inward with a crack.

A second later the wood splinters when the door is kicked in.

I scream as two men in dark tracksuits burst inside like they own the place. Everything in the room seems to get smaller as their presence fills the space.

Mom stumbles back a step, her hand clutching the front of her robe. “What do you want!” she barks, trying to sound angry, but there’s a tremor in her tone.

The taller of the two men reaches into his pocket, pulls out a folded piece of paper, and dangles it in front of her face.

“Arkadi owed a debt that was never paid back,” he rumbles in a deep, Russian-accented voice. “That debt needs to be settled. Now.”

He drops the paper to the ground and shifts back on his heels, folding his arms over his chest. The other guy glances around the apartment disdainfully before his eyes settle on me, my skin crawling and my stomach souring when he grins a toothy, leering grin at me.

Vera stoops down and plucks the paper from the ground, scowling. She stands, opening it and staring at it with barely focused eyes before she barks out a laugh.

“One hundred thousand dollars?” she crows, her voice slurred. “Are you fucking serious?”

The first man, with his arms still crossed over his chest, merely shrugs. “With interest, that’s what you two owe Mr. Popov now.”

My blood runs cold.

Vera lets out a short, humorless laugh, like this is some kind of mistake. “What? No. That’s—” She shakes her head. “That’s not our problem.”

The man’s expression doesn’t change.

The other one, the one who hasn’t spoken yet but has been looking at me like he’s removing my clothes with his eyes, steps closer.

Vera swallows, trying again. “Arkadi’s fucking *dead*,” she says, quieter now. “He died four months ago.”

The taller man leans against the counter, his fingers drumming on the crumpled paper. “Yes, and he left behind unfinished business.” His voice is calm, casual, but there’s a razor-sharp edge beneath it.

Vera opens her mouth, but he lifts a finger, silencing her.

“Five thousand a week,” he continues. “Until the debt is paid off.”

I suck in a breath.

Five thousand?

That’s impossible. It might as well be a million a week. A gazillion. It could be five *hundred* and still be as unattainable as a ticket to Mars right now.

Vera shakes her head, frantic. “We don’t have that kind of money!”

His lips curl slightly with the barest hint of amusement. “Then you’d better figure it out.”

He turns his head, eyes flicking toward me for the first time.

Slowly. Deliberately.

The air between us stretches thin, humming. Then he gives the slightest, faintest smirk.

“Or next time,” he murmurs, “we’ll take something else instead.”

His gaze drags over me.

My skin prickles, with fear or rage I don't know, and my breath stays locked away in my chest.

The man lets the moment hang before brushing down his track suit like this has all been some friendly business arrangement, then glances at his partner. They step back toward the door. The one who did all the talking pauses, fingers tapping twice on the doorframe as he looks back at Vera.

“First payment’s due in a week,” he reminds her.

Then the door slams behind them, rattling in its hinges and jangling the broken lock and splintered doorframe.

I don’t move.

“*Mom*…”

“Let me *think*, Lyra!” she snaps, her face pale as she staggers back to the couch before exhaling a slow, shaky breath and reaching for her drink.

“Even *dead*, that piece of shit keeps ruining my life,” she mumbles, sinking onto the couch and staring haggardly at the wall.

I barely hear her. My mind is already elsewhere.

One hundred thousand dollars. Five grand a week.

The weight of it presses down on me, suffocating.

Like Vera’s, my hands are trembling. But I don’t reach for a bottle. I reach for my phone and scroll to Brooklyn’s contact, my thumb hovering over the call button.

I don’t want to do this.

But I don’t think I have a choice.

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3

LYRA

Fuck. I should have worn something warmer.

Even through my winter coat, the icy wind slices through me, across my bare legs, seeping through my clothes like it's trying to reach my bones, making me tremble.

Or maybe I'm just shaking because I'm terrified.

The car that brought me here is already gone, leaving me standing in the freezing cold New York night blindfolded and vulnerable.

The moment the car door opened, a hand took my arm—not roughly, but firmly, guiding me out and onto solid ground. I nearly tripped, but the grip steadied me, fingers pressing into my coat sleeve before letting go.

I have no idea where I am, because I've been blindfolded ever since the car picked me up maybe twenty minutes ago.

Brooklyn insisted—*insisted*—that this gig was neither stripping nor prostitution in any sense when I asked her about it for the umpteenth time after I made that phone call.

"It's literally just a dance gig," she'd reassured me.

But standing here now, shivering in the unknown, secrecy wrapping itself tighter around me with every step I take, I wonder how much of that was her convincing me, and how much was her convincing herself.

I don’t have time to spiral. The hand returns, gripping my elbow lightly, urging me forward.

It’s happening.

I remind myself of the instructions the man who answered the phone gave me in a low, quiet voice two nights ago, after he’d asked how I got his number. I told him Brooklyn’s name, and that I was another ballet dancer. I’d started to awkwardly give him my dance resume over the phone, but he’d stopped me and given me these *rules* instead:

Arrive at the pickup location by 8:30 PM.

Do not bring any personal belongings beyond essentials.

Do *not* bring your phone.

Lateness or failure to adhere to these rules will result in immediate disqualification from the job and any compensation.

I did exactly as I was told. And now? I’m here.

…Wherever *here* is.

I keep my steps light, quiet, listening for any subtle movements around me as I’m led through a set of doors. The temperature shifts dramatically, the cold of outside giving way to warmth. I can hear the sound of high heels clicking as the other dancers…presumably…are led with me down a hallway.

Moving deeper into the building.

A door slides opens with a ding.

Elevator.

My suspicions are confirmed as I am herded into a crowded space, rubbing shoulders with other bodies of my size and build—again, I’m guessing the other girls who are here to dance tonight.

The elevator drops lower. When the doors ding open, we’re led out through what feel like cramped hallways. Finally, a door opens with a slight creak, and we’re led into another space.

The blindfold doesn’t come off immediately. I hear shuffling, movement, the shifting of bodies. The faintest floral scent drifts through the air—perfume, expensive and subtle.

Then, finally, fingers at the knot behind my head, the sensation of fabric slipping away.

Light. Soft and golden.

I blink, my eyes adjusting as the world comes into focus. I’m standing in a large, elegant dressing area, like something out of an animated princess movie.

A row of vanities, the bulbs surrounding their mirrors glowing with warm, flattering light. Each station has a clothing rack hung with a delicate and luxurious, shimmering costume—sexy, but not stripper-sexy, at least.

Seven stations. Seven girls.

I turn. My eyes immediately find Brooklyn. She’s standing a few feet away, her own blindfold freshly removed, her dark eyes locking on mine for the briefest of moments. There’s a tightness in her jaw, a stiffness in her posture.

Then I notice the men who led us in here.

They’re standing among us, silently watching. Each wears a sleek, matte black Venetian mask, ornate but expressionless, hiding their faces completely, leaving only their sharp suits and unreadable body language.

Their presence is…unsettling.

But then, as if responding to some unspoken signal, they turn and walk out.

Except one.

He stands near the door, his gloved hands resting lightly in front of him.

“Get dressed in the outfits assigned to you,” he says, his voice muffled slightly by the mask. “Fifteen minutes. Someone will return to escort you to the performance when it’s time.”

Then he, too, is gone.

Silence follows.

For a moment, no one moves. I step to Brooklyn, my voice low. “What the *fuck* is this?”

Brooklyn shakes her head. “Just get dressed,” she whispers. “Last time, they said we weren’t supposed to talk to each other.”

I glance at the other girls, all silently doing as they’re told, and a fresh chill rolls through me.

Brooklyn catches the look on my face and softens slightly. “I know. It’s weird. But it’s not bad.”

I hesitate. But then I think of the men forcing their way into our apartment. The debt. Vera’s face.

I move to my station, swallowing hard as I pull the outfit from the rack.

It’s…beautiful.

And revealing. Very, very revealing, and I say that as someone who’s been dancing in tights and leotards her whole life.

Slinky gold fabric, almost sheer in certain places. The kind that clings and molds to the body, leaving nothing to the imagination.

I run my fingers over the material, my stomach tightening. I’m used to costumes, to exposing skin to facilitate movement, but this… This is different.

I hesitate, then remind myself why I’m here.

Five thousand dollars.

Yep, there’s my motivation.

I change quickly, my hands shaking slightly as I slip out of my clothes and into the costume, adjusting the fit. No bra. No real support. But it’s elegant, in its own way.

I turn to the mirror, taking in my reflection.

The girl staring back at me is someone I don’t quite recognize.

A soft exhale from my left catches my attention.

Brooklyn—already dressed, smoothing a hand over her hip, staring at her own reflection like she’s trying to convince herself of something.

Before either of us can speak, the door opens again and figures step in.

At first I think it’s the same men as before—but then I realize I'm wrong. It’s women now, clad in sharp black suits, moving with quiet precision. They, too, wear masks.

One of them steps in front of me, a faint, cool, clean scent trailing from her. She holds up a piece of black silk.

Another blindfold.

Before I can protest she’s wrapping the fabric over my eyes, tying it gently.

A flicker of motion to my right—someone else is being blindfolded. Before my vision disappears completely, I see a metallic glint.

One of the masked women is securing a smooth gold mask over another dancer’s blindfold. Unlike the ones the women are wearing, and the men before, this one has an expression that suggests the face of a classical Greek sculpture of a woman.

A fresh wave of unease snakes through me.

My blindfold is secured. Then a mask slipped over my face. A second later, something is pressed into my palm.

Earbuds.

“Put these in,” the woman behind me instructs softly.

I fumble to obey, clumsy, my breath coming too fast. The moment the earbuds are in my ears, a female voice crackles to life.

“You’ve done well so far.”

I nearly jump at the sound.

“You’ll be escorted shortly. Relax and trust the process.”

My stomach flips, but I take a slow breath, forcing myself to stay calm as a hand brushes my elbow, guiding me forward.

I move carefully, barefoot, the cold floor sending bites of chill up through my legs. The woman leading me says nothing as she leads me with a steady, unhurried pace. I don’t know how many turns we’ve taken, how many doors we’ve passed, only that we’re going deeper.

Farther away from the world I know. From reality.

The air changes suddenly. It’s heavier here, charged, like stepping into a hushed church before a sermon. Except even blindfolded, I can tell there’s nothing holy about this place. I don’t know how I know, but I do. It’s like an ominous, unsettling feeling quivering on my skin.

My breath is loud against the serene classical music playing in my ears. There are no outside noises. No coughs, no whispers, no shuffling of feet.

But Brooklyn was right. I can feel them. I can’t see the audience, but I know they’re there.

Watching.

A delicate shiver chases up my spine. My instincts are screaming at me to turn back, but it’s too late for that. I have nowhere to go but forward. The woman guiding me finally slows, adjusting her grip on my arm.

The voice in my earbuds crackles to life.

“In a moment, you’ll be led into a cage,” the soothing voice says.

I stiffen, my blood chilling instantly.

The woman beside me nudges me forward until my hands brush metal bars, cool and unyielding.

“If this is your first night with us,” the voice continues smoothly, “do not be alarmed. This is merely so that when you dance, you’ll be in a confined area and will not hurt yourself, or others. The insides of the bars are padded for your protection.”

Fuck.

I don’t like this.

But five thousand dollars is five thousand fucking dollars.

I let the woman guide me inside, my body brushing against the metal as I step forward. It’s not small, not cramped, but it’s…contained.

Controlled. Like everything about this entire experience so far.

The voice continues, soft and serene. “The music will begin in a moment. Dance however feels natural. You have an audience. Please note that it is vitally important that you do not try to remove your mask or earbuds. Doing so will result in immediate expulsion, and other consequences.”

My stomach twists.

I want to ask *what consequences,* but something tells me I’m not sure I’d want to know.

The music starts and with a small smile, I realize I recognize it: “Brotsjór”, a modern piece by the Icelandic composer Ólafur Arnalds. I danced to it last year as part of a contemporary ballet anthology the Zakharova put on.

For the first time since arriving here, I feel something close to steady.

I know this piece. I know how to move to it.

I can do this.

For five grand? I can do this on a bed of fucking *nails*.

I take a deep breath. And then, I dance.

At first, it’s hard to ignore the cage, the blindfold, and the suffocating weight of unseen eyes pressing in from all sides. But then the music swells, filling my heart and body, and I let go.

My body moves on instinct, feet gliding across the floor, arms slicing the air. My muscles remember the choreography, shifting through movements as the tempo builds and the rhythm pulses through me.

This part is easy. Dancing is the one thing that has always made sense to me, has always grounded me and gotten me through the madder, more dangerous chapters of my life.

Then, horribly, as I whirl, the fabric of my blindfold under the mask shifts. It's not much—a tiny sliver of movement, a miniscule tug beneath my mask.

But suddenly…

I can *see*.

My pulse jangles, my skin instantly tingling all over.

I can see where I am, through the gleaming gold bars of the huge cage I'm dancing in.

Holy shit…

The space is massive, cavernous, the architecture breathtaking yet ominous—like a gothic cathedral without windows, illuminated only by the flicker of candlelight and low, golden chandeliers.

I shouldn't be seeing this.

There will be consequences.

Sheer panic roars through my veins as I spin, half expecting to see guards or who even knows what racing over to throw me out on the street or far, far worse.

But I don't see anything except the other cages with the other dancers moving to the same music floating through my own earbuds.

No one can tell I can see.

It's a thin strand of hope, but I cling to it for dear life, forcing myself to keep dancing as I turn on the balls of my feet, my arms cutting through the air.

Even as I keep dancing, my eyes scan the space, absorbing details I was never meant to witness.

It’s like a scene out of an ancient Roman orgy. Or some decadent party that laughing French nobility would attend while the rabble starved outside.

Tables stretch across the room, heavy with platters overflowing with lavish silver platters of food. Wine flows freely, poured into ornate goblets, spilled onto waiting tongues, dripping down open throats.

Bodies drape over chaise lounges and velvet settees, only half-dressed or not at all.

Everyone, however, is wearing a mask.

Limbs tangle in lazy, languid pleasure. Some guests whisper in hushed, intimate tones, others laugh huskily as fingers skim over skin, as teeth graze throats, as hands disappear into layers of silk and lace.

I flinch as I rip my gaze away, my stomach knotting.

What. The. *Fuck*.

It’s pure, erotic opulence. It’s madness, like something out of *Caligula*.

I should be disgusted. I should be terrified. I’m…not.

Not entirely.

Because beneath the fear and the sheer, breathless panic of being caught, something else stirs deep in my stomach.

Curiosity.

There’s also something even more dangerous swirling in my core.

Fascination.

I try to force myself to keep dancing, to not call attention to the fact that I can see the insanity around me, but then my gaze shifts, and suddenly, the feast is not the craziest thing in the room.

Holy fuck.

At the far end of the cathedral space is a raised dais with five black thrones in a row. And sitting on those five thrones are five men all in black…

…Each wearing a matte black mask with animal features.

A bull, a wolf, a dog, a bird, and a stag.

The moment I see them, something inside me locks up.

It goes beyond fear. Beyond the sharp, instinctive panic that pricks at my skin, sending every nerve in my body onto high alert. It’s deeper than that—more visceral, more primal.

The masks are simple and unadorned, eerily blank, and somehow, that only makes them more terrifying. There’s no expression, no personality, no hint of the men underneath. Just sleek black surfaces sculpted into animal forms, each distinct, yet thematically linked. A bull. A wolf. A dog. A bird. A stag.

The men don’t move. But it’s like the sheer weight of their presence is suffocating, a silent command of power that doesn’t require words.

I should look away. I should drop my gaze, try to forget I saw them.

But I don’t.

I *can’t*.

A slow, electric pulse unfurls in my stomach, winding through my limbs like a tightly drawn wire.

These aren’t just men.

They feel ancient. Elemental. Gods watching from above, waiting to pass judgment.

Predators, waiting for their prey to make a mistake.

I breathe faster as I instinctively twist my body in time with the music. Then my gaze drops to where the five masked men are looking. On the floor, right in front of the dais, a man is kneeling, flanked by guards, bound by chains to the stone floor.

My pulse quickens, chest rising and falling as I try to keep myself positioned so that I can see what the fuck is happening through the tiny gap in my blindfold.

The prisoner wears no mask. He looks in his late forties, maybe a little older, with thinning hair, a belly straining the suit that it looks like he just ran a marathon in, and a stricken, horrified look on his face. He's shaking, pleading with the five of them.

I can't hear him through the music in my ears, but I can see read his body language, see the way the masked figures remain completely, unflinchingly still.

I *know* it's reckless.

I *know* I shouldn't.

There will be consequences.

But I have to know what the fuck this is.

When I turn, I brush my hand past my hair, flicking my ear ever so slightly and dislodging one of my earbuds just a little.

Sound rushes in, and I hear the man in the bird mask speak.

"Andrei Mushkin."

The entire place goes silent. Every guest freezes in the middle of what they're doing.

"You have been found guilty by the Black Court for the crime of breaking a blood marker."

The kneeling man—Mushkin, did he call him?—sobs.

The man speaking barely acknowledges it.

"Mr. Mushkin, your fate now lies with my associate, The Hound."

The man with the dog mask rises. He descends the dais with slow, measured steps, radiating unhinged hunger. His broad shoulders strain the fabric of his black suit, thick biceps rippling under the sleeves as he rolls his neck and stops right in front of the prisoner.

"Fight, or flight," The Hound growls in a low, velvety voice that dances over my skin like silk and smoke. A voice that tugs at something inside of

me, like a memory I can’t place.

Mushkin shakes his head violently.

“*Fight…*” The Hound murmurs again, turning and gesturing toward a table laid with gleaming, evil-looking medieval weapons. “Or flight.” He turns the other way, raising a hand to a massive stone doorway carved with runic symbols, with nothing but blackness beyond it.

A chill slithers up my spine.

“I’m not going in there!” Mushkin screams.

“Fight it is,” The Hound rasps.

There’s glee in his tone.

Still dancing, I watch him walk to the table and select two gigantic hunting knives. One of the guards walks over to him, takes one and brings it to the prisoner. They press the hilt of it into Mushkin’s shaking hands after they release his wrists from their bonds.

Mushkin is still sobbing as The Hound twirls his own blade absently, gazing at it through his mask as the thick gold ring on his finger with the black opal or maybe diamond glints alongside the knife.

“Mr. Raven,” he murmurs quietly, turning to glance up at the dais toward the man in the bird mask. “I believe we’re ready.”

The Raven nods. “Then the fight has already begun.”

Mushkin stumbles shakily to his feet, weeping abjectly. He and The Hound circle each other. Even I can tell this isn’t going to be a fight. It’s going to be a slaughter. The Hound is clearly just fucking with him.

Suddenly, he makes his move.

And he’s *fast*.

Mushkin barely has time to react before The Hound's knife slices both his wrists. Mushkin yelps, his own weapon clattering to the floor. The Hound’s next slash takes him across first one thigh and then the other, sending him to his knees.

Then, The Hound is done toying with his prey.

He grabs Mushkin by the throat, yanks him close, and with one thrust rams the knife into his chest and rips upward, through flesh, through muscle, through throat, sending a tsunami of red gushing all over the stone floor.

It can’t be helped. Can’t be stopped. Can’t be contained.

Not the blood.

I'm talking about the *gasp* that bursts sharply and audibly from my throat.

I try to spin—try and *force* myself to tear my eyes away from the horror in front of me and pray that nobody heard me.

Unfortunately, someone did.

Every nerve in my body whines. Every inch of my skin goes cold as The Hound turns and stares *directly* at me, his head cocking slightly, his attention locking on me with unnerving precision.

My entire body goes still as he drops the body, knife and all, to the ground. The guards drag the dead prisoner away as my ears ring.

Keep dancing.

Keep. Fucking. Dancing.

The voice in my ear crackles to life again.

“Well done. Sadly, tonight’s show is shortened, but you will all be paid the agreed-upon amount. In a moment, you will be escorted back to your dressing room.”

The masked men stand from the dais and melt into the shadows. The guests knock back their last gulps of wine or get in one last kiss or grope before they get up from the various couches, chairs, beds, and floor mats, turning to file out through shadowy side doorways.

The masked women open our cages. The woman that steps into mine touches my arm, not wanting to startle me, before she takes it in her grip and leads me beyond the golden bars.

Suddenly, a presence materializes right in front of me.

Him.

The Hound.

The masked woman leading me stops, lifting her chin to look up at the man towering over us. He simply shakes his head side to side, not saying a word.

Instantly, she drops my arm, turns, and walks away.

The rest of the guests leave. The other dancers are gone. Suddenly, I'm alone with him in the thunderous silence of the underground cathedral, the coppery scent of blood still lingering in the air.

"You shouldn't have seen that."

His voice is dark. Dangerous.

I'd back away from him, but there's nowhere to go.

He takes another step, a predator closing in on his prey. Suddenly, his arm shoots out and his powerful hand wraps like iron around my throat. I choke against his fingers as he pulls me close, my feet stumbling as he drags me almost right against his muscled body, the black eyeholes of his mask staring into my very soul.

"Tell me, little dancer," he growls quietly. "*What* should I do with you?"

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4

LYRA

THE UNDERGROUND CATHEDRAL space is silent.

The body might be gone but the blood remains, staining the stone, pooling in the cracks, glistening under the flickering chandeliers that sway slightly above us. The air is thick with the scent of death and copper.

The Hound's hand is still wrapped around my throat, not squeezing, not choking, but *guiding*. Controlling. Claiming.

He pulls me closer, turning my breath ragged, making my limbs tremble. I don't fight. I don't resist. I just cling to his hard-as-iron forearms as he half-drags me across the stone floor to the center of the huge room.

Right on top of the pool of blood from Andrei Mushkin, whoever he was.

The blood is still warm.

A sick shudder rushes through me and my pulse slams against my ribs.

The Hound finally lets me go. But I don't move. I don't make a run for it. Even though I'm not restrained anymore, I still feel trapped. Frozen. Immobilized.

The Hound steps closer.

The sheer *intensity* of him—towering, overpowering, unshakable—makes my lungs seize. He yanks the earbuds from my ears and tosses them aside.

I try to speak, but my voice catches in my throat. When I finally manage to get the words out, they’re small, shaky, pathetic.

“I… I didn’t see anything. I can't.”

He just tilts his head to the side, his black mask reflecting the candlelight like something in a nightmare.

Suddenly, his hand shoots out before I even register it, as if he’s about to slam it into my face.

I yank my head back instinctively, my breath leaving me in a sharp, startled gasp.

A low, dark chuckle rumbles through the massive space.

“I think we *both* know you can see just fine,” he growls.

Coldness seeps into my veins as the horrifying reality of my situation begins to settle over my soul. He lets the silence stretch, his head still tilted slightly in that unsettling, savage way.

“And you’re a terrible liar.”

I force myself to breathe. To keep from completely unraveling.

“I didn’t mean for the blindfold to slip,” I whisper. “It just…happened.”

His posture doesn’t shift. But something in the air around him does.

Like he’s considering something.

Considering *me*.

He reaches out again. This time, his fingers slide under the edge of my mask, the gold ring with the black stone on his finger scraping my cheek as he strokes one thick finger against it, slowly and deliberately. He pushes his finger higher, and suddenly, I feel him pull at the blindfold. He tugs it with two fingers, slipping it down from my eyes and letting it drop around my neck, leaving my mask in place.

My stomach tightens. I need to get out of here. I have to run.

But to where? And *how*?

The Hound steps back slightly, but if anything, that's worse. Because now, his posture is almost relaxed. Like this is just a game to him.

"I'll give you a choice," he says, voice curling around the words. "The same choice, actually, that I gave the man you whose sentencing you just inadvertently saw carried out. You can stay and fight—"

He nods at the table of nightmarish weapons, including the knife he *just* used, now sticky with blood.

My throat tightens.

"—or you can choose flight."

My stomach plummets.

His lips curve into a smirk beneath his mask. "Either way, you'll entertain me."

I shake my head, my pulse jangling. "W-what does that mean?"

"It means," he murmurs, stepping even closer, "if you're not interested in proving you're stronger than me—and I wouldn't suggest that—you can try to prove you're *faster* than me."

My mind races.

I can't fight him. Not in a million fucking years. He's at least a foot taller than my five and a half feet, his shoulders are twice as wide as mine, and he looks like he lifts mid-sized SUVs to warm up at the gym.

There isn't a single scenario where I win a fight against this monster.

But running?

That's a risk, too. But a smaller one than fighting him.

I have no idea what's beyond this room. But I do know I don't want to find out what happens if I stay with this man who is watching me like a god playing with a mortal.

“Flight.”

I say it before I can talk myself out of it. His head tilts, like he’s pleased. Then he gestures to the stone archway behind him. Now that I’m closer, I can see it leads to a long stone hallway lit with flickering candles, then a fork, sending the hallway in two different directions.

My stomach knots.

“What the hell is this?” I breathe.

The Hound’s head inclines. “This is the Labyrinth.”

Ice trickles down my spine.

“What’s in there?”

“A way out,” he says, almost teasing. “…Maybe.”

I swallow hard. “Anything else?”

He steps in front of me, blocking the entrance.

“*Me*.”

A sharp exhale rips from my lips.

“You get a thirty second head start,” he murmurs, his voice eager, excited.

Turned on.

“Then I chase you.”

My stomach free-falls.

I don’t want to ask, but I do anyway. “What happens if you catch me?”

“Thirty.”

My breath shudders.

“Twenty-nine.”

I turn, looking wildly for another way out. There isn’t one.

“Twenty-eight.”

I stumble into the entrance of the maze, my limbs already preparing to run.

“Twenty-seven.”

“Tell me!” I beg, my voice cracking. “What happens if you catch me?”

He doesn’t stop counting. Doesn’t even hesitate. Just cocks his head to the side again.

“*Whatever I want*,” he rasps.

My pulse explodes.

I turn, and I *run*, fast, breath tearing raggedly from my lungs, bare feet slamming against the cold stone floor as I hurtle deeper into the maze.

The flickering candlelight barely illuminates the twisting corridors, the narrow passageways turning on sharp angles, forcing me to make split-second decisions—left, right, straight. I have no idea where I’m going: I’m just looking for the way out, even if a huge part of me wonders if there even *is* one.

Then, suddenly, I can hear him.

His footsteps aren’t rushed. Measured. Steady. A predator in no hurry, hunting his prey with a confidence that sends ice sliding down my spine.

He’s toying with me.

Letting me exhaust myself.

There will be consequences…

I push harder, my muscles burning. There has to be a way out, there has to be—

Dead end.

I skid to a stop so fast I nearly crash into the solid stone wall blocking my escape.

No. No, no, *no*. There's nowhere to go.

My hands fly to the cold, unyielding surface, palms splayed against it as if I could somehow force it to open. I spin around just as a shadow moves at the other end of the corridor.

And then he’s upon me, caging me in.

The Hound.

His mask gleams faintly in the candlelight, his massive frame blocking the only exit. His suit jacket is gone, leaving him in just his pants and vest, the sleeves of his black dress shirt rolled up over his muscled, veined forearms. That damn black and gold ring on his finger glints, winking at me.

Dark, breathless terror coils in my gut.

“You’re faster than I expected,” he muses, his voice filled with mock admiration. “But you don’t know this game like I do. Do you.”

I press myself to the wall.

“Stay the fuck away,” I warn, my voice betraying me and trembling despite my best efforts. “I didn’t sign up for this! I didn’t agree to this!”

He takes another slow step forward.

“What you *agreed to*,” he growls, his tone dripping with amusement, “was to follow the rules. You chose to break the rules, fully aware there would be consequences.”

“I didn’t break any—!”

“Every action has an equal and opposite reaction, little dancer,” he murmurs quietly. "Newton's Third Law of Motion."

Fucking hell, it’s the even, almost emotionless tone in his voice that scares me the most. He’s not angry, or sneering, or lording it over me.

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

It’s like talking to a robot. A statue.

Something *inhuman*.

I make a desperate move—feinting to the right, trying to slip past him. But he moves too fast, catching my wrist easily, twisting me around fluidly until my back collides with the cold stone wall.

A gasp bursts from my lips, but not one of pain. He’s not hurting me.

Just holding me. Containing me.

One of his hands pins both of mine to the wall above my head, his body close, heat rolling off him despite the chill of the underground maze. His other hand rests on my hip, testing.

A fresh tremor rolls through me, but it’s not entirely fear.

I should be fighting. I should be screaming. Instead, my breath stutters and my back arches slightly, pressing into him for just a second before I catch myself.

What the hell is wrong with me?

“I like the fight in you,” he murmurs, his breath warm near my ear.

Too warm. Too inviting. The overwhelmingly masculine scent of him—leather, tangerine, rosewood—crushes my senses, rendering me helpless in his grasp.

“But I'm afraid you’re out of moves, little dancer.”

I swallow hard, my heart slamming against my ribs.

His fingers skate down my arm, then my ribs, lingering at the curve of my waist.

A warning. A preamble.

I should say something. Pull away.

I don’t.

Because I’m breathless. Heat is pooling low in my stomach, twisting tight.

His lips hover so close to my skin that I can feel the warmth of them, the phantom trace of a breath that never quite touches me.

“You’re trembling,” he murmurs, his voice edged with dark satisfaction.

I suck in a sharp breath, fingers clenching at nothing.

He chuckles, dark and knowing, like he’s peeling back my layers and prying his way into every secret black thought I have.

“Not because you’re *afraid*, though.”

His fingers slide lower, slowly enough that I could stop him, push away from him, but I don’t.

And he sees it.

His fingers pinch the fabric of my gold silk dress. He slowly tugs, drawing it tighter, pulling the hem up my bare thighs and sending shivers over my skin. My nipples are already straining hard, pebbled against the delicate, almost translucent material. As the gown shifts electrically against me, I can feel a vicious throb tingle through every nerve ending, making my thighs shake.

“There it is,” he breathes.

I bite my lip to keep from making a sound, but he notices it.

The moment I break.

A low, predatory chuckle rumbles beneath his mask. “I wonder if you’ll ever forgive yourself for liking it.”

I shudder violently.

“I—I *don't*—”

“We've already established what a terrible liar you are,” he growls darkly. “So let’s try this.”

I gasp sharply as he yanks my dress even higher, so much that it’s barely covering the black lace of my panties.

“I’m going to put my hand between your legs,” The Hound murmurs. “If your little panties are dry, and if you recoil from my touch, you’re free to go.”

My pulse thickens like syrup in my veins, a chill clawing its way down my spine.

“But if I find you as messy and wet for me as I know I’m going to—”

“You *won’t*, you sick fucking—”

I cry out, a shattering, horrible whimper as he casually reaches up and pinches one of my nipples through the dress. Pure heat and an electric throb zip through my core, turning it molten.

What. The. FUCK is wrong with you, self.

“Let me finish,” he purrs, his voice saccharine. “Or, instead of *this* game, we’ll play the one where I turn you around and ram my fat cock up your ass until you can’t remember what walking normally feels like.”

A lump forms in my throat. I swallow it, and nod my head.

“*Good girl*. Now, as I was saying: *when* I find your panties soaked for me—I’m guessing even more so after that last threat, based on my initial psychological evaluation of you—”

“Which tells you *what*, exactly?” I blurt.

The blank mask tips dangerously to the side, its black eyeholes stabbing into me.

He lets the silence stretch out, allows me to squirm.

His heat is too much, too close, his strong hand still resting heavy on my hip, pulling my dress almost all the way up. His fingers flexing just enough to remind me he’s still holding me there.

Then, in a voice low and dark, edged with cruel amusement, he says:

“It tells me you like *fear*, little dancer.”

My breath catches.

“It tells me that you and the dark side have a storied past, and it *tells me* that no matter how strenuously your mind tries to protest, your body knows the

truth.” His fingers suddenly skate lower, teasing, tracing down the seam where my inner thigh meets my sex.

My entire body trembles, heat thrumming within my core.

“It tells me that you like the darkness when it comes wrapped up *just right*.”

A sharp, sick thrill curls low in my belly.

Suddenly, his hand is slipping between my thighs, his palm resting right on my pussy through the lace of my panties.

Which, mortifyingly, are *soaked*.

A low, malicious chuckle rumbles from his chest as he dips his head. I shudder, my breath turning staggered and halting as the heat of his voice teases right against my earlobe.

“*Seems we have our answer*.”

His thumb hooks into the edge of the lace, pulling my panties aside. And then suddenly, without warning, he’s sinking *two* thick fingers deep inside me.

I jolt, gasping violently at the sudden intrusion and the abrupt feeling of being filled so entirely. I choke out a moan, whimpering as my hips buck, my inner walls clamping down on his fingers. My hands fly out instinctively, but when they land against his forearm, my fingers digging into those iron muscles, I’m not actually sure if I’m trying to push him away or clinging to him in eager desperation.

“Well, well, well,” The Hound growls darkly. His thick fingers ease out, then instantly ram back in. I moan out a whimper as he curls them deep, and my face goes beet red at the lewd sounds of my desire squelching around them.

“Looks like I was right in my assessment, wasn’t I.”

I start to shake my head and open my mouth to tell him how wrong he is. But I lose the power of speech when he shoves his fingers into me again, curling them against an achy, needy part of me that’s roaring to be set free.

“We’ve already determined that you’re a shitty liar, little dancer,” he growls, thrusting roughly into me again, the sound of my arousal filling the air around us as my face burns.

“I *knew* you’d like this,” he rasps into my ear. “I *knew* you’d turn into a messy little slut if I chased you through the darkness like willing little prey.”

“*Fuck you*,” I choke, my fingers digging into his rippling forearm. His fingers scissor inside me, the embarrassingly wet sounds drifting up to my ears as my walls clench needily and desperately around the intruding fingers.

I lift a hand to his chest, trying to shove him away from me. But it’s like trying to push over a mountain.

“Fuck me, you say,” he muses. “I *was* going to be content to lick your cum off my fingers. But if you’d rather lick it off my cock after I fill your pussy with my own cum, I could be convinced to change my plans.”

“No...”

The word trembles from my lips but carries neither weight nor conviction.

The Hound groans, the sound vibrating through my spine like a low, feral growl.

“Careful using that word around me, little dancer,” he snarls into my ear, his breath hot and teasing against my throat. “You might just turn me on too much.”

A violent shudder wracks my body as his fingers plunge into my pussy over and over, curling, stroking, claiming. Sticky wetness coats my thighs. My legs quake, my nails dig into his shirt, and my breath frays into gasps as he pins me tighter against the cold, unyielding wall.

“*Yes*,” he rasps, voice dark with filthy enjoyment.

His hips press against mine, trapping me. I can feel the obscene bulge in his pants throbbing against my thigh, sending a dark shiver down my spinal column.

“Push me away, little prey. *Fight back*.”

A mewling whimper tears from my throat as I press my palm against his chest, trying—*needing*—to create space between us.

“Hit me.”

I freeze. “Wha—”

“I said HIT. ME.”

The words are snarled, monstrous, demanding.

I react before I think.

My hand flies up, slamming hard against his chest.

A sharp exhale rips from him. Instantly, my legs buckle as his fingers ram harder, deeper, twisting, stretching, pushing me to a breaking point I didn’t know I had.

“Harder.”

His voice is low, guttural, seething with challenge.

“I said fucking *fight* me, little dancer, not tickle me.”

My stomach is clenched so tight I can hardly stand. The way he says it—wanting, needing, daring me to give him more—sends a brutal, vicious ache spiraling through me.

I hit him again.

Harder.

His fingers drive deeper. Rougher.

I can’t stop. Neither can he.

Pleasure and pain blur into something else entirely—raw, depraved, undeniable.

My body arches into his touch even as my fists keep striking against his chest, his mask, his arms; my movements growing sloppier, more desperate

and unhinged.

A growl rumbles deep in his throat, pleased, starving.

“*There* we are,” he breathes, his grip tightening, putting me exactly where he wants me as I teeter on the edge of oblivion, his fingers stroking in and out at a frantic pace that takes my breath away.

“Be a good little fuck toy and come on my fingers.”

I break completely, shattering with a sharp, strangled cry, my entire body wracked with too much sensation, pulsing, spiraling into something brutal and all-consuming.

I don’t know if I’m still fighting him or clinging to him.

But he does.

He knows exactly what he’s done to me. What he’s unlocked.

Suddenly, his fingers slide from between my legs. I wince at the sudden rush of rawness, mingled with a throbbing, achy need I’ve never felt before.

Slowly, he raises his hand between us, and my eyes lock onto the glistening wetness coating his fingers and the black and gold ring.

That hand reaches for me. I’m too stunned to move as he slips his fingers under the edge of my mask, and before I know what’s happening, the fingers that were just inside me are pushing against the softness of my lips.

“*Clean them*,” he growls quietly.

For the briefest half a second I hesitate, and don’t do as he says.

But then, wordlessly, I *do*.

My lips part, and I shiver when he slides his wet fingers between them, pushing them deep over my tongue until I’m almost gagging. My lips close around them without being told to do so.

Heat pools in my core as my tongue licks them clean.

Then a low grunt comes from behind his mask as he slips his fingers from my lips and draws his hand away.

I nearly stumble, my legs weak, my body thrumming with all the confusion, rage and humiliation I don’t want to feel.

I lift my eyes to his—to the black holes where his eyes should be.

“Run away, little dancer,” he says, watching me like he’s analyzing every reaction, every crack in my armor. “You've got fire. I like that. But you still shouldn’t have seen what you saw tonight.”

“Then why let me go?” I croak, my voice trembling but defiant.

“Because chasing you was fun, and maybe I’d like to do it again.”

Then, without another word, he melts back into the shadows.

“Wait!” I yell suddenly. “How the hell do I get out!?” I shout into the empty silence.

A beat passes.

Then suddenly, everything goes dark. The torches all flicker out at once, plunging the maze into pure blackness.

Panic claws up my throat, but then new lights ignite, just a few, near the floor. A second later, I realize it’s a pathway, guiding me out.

I don’t hesitate.

I *run*.

When I reach the end of the maze, a masked woman is waiting. She simply nods, then turns sharply. “This way.”

I follow on shaky legs, my mind still scrambled, my body still burning with the imprint of The Hound’s touch.

The dressing room is empty when we get back to it. Everyone’s gone, including Brooklyn.

I change quickly, my fingers clumsy as I strip off the gold costume and pull on my clothes.

The masked woman says nothing as she steps behind me, securing a blindfold over my eyes again.

It's worse this time. Because now I know what I’m being kept from seeing.

She leads me to an elevator, then a waiting car. The car door opens, and a hand helps me inside before we pull away.

Ten or so minutes later, I'm blinking against the cold night air, blindfold removed, my breath clouding in front of me as I finger the envelope with my pay.

I’m standing in the exact same place I was picked up. Like none of it ever happened.

But it did.

My heart is still racing, my skin still burning, my mind still spiraling with the memory of him. The car that dropped me off pulls away, and without wasting a second, I turn and *run*.

I don’t stop until I’m back at my apartment.

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5

THE HOUND

THE AIR in the inner sanctum thrums with power.

The space is old and grand, steeped in history that smells of leather and smoke. Walls lined with gilt-edged books stretch up to a vaulted ceiling, dark wood gleaming in the glow of flickering candlelight. A fire crackles low in the massive stone hearth, casting shifting shadows across the mahogany and deep green velvet furniture.

Tonight, we aren’t alone.

The women who sat masked and elegant in the audience earlier now lounge around the room, draped over the furniture like courtesans in an emperor’s court.

Some perch near the bar, sipping wine from crystal goblets, whispering amongst themselves as they steal furtive, daring glances at us. Others are bolder, pressing themselves close, their hands casually lingering as they graze a shoulder, a forearm, a jawline.

They came here for the thrill of proximity, like groupies after a Stones concert.

I step in, shaking off the vestiges of the hunt, rolling my shoulders and closing the heavy door behind me.

The Wolf turns first. A woman is already nestled in his lap, her fingers trailing lazy circles against his collarbone through his half-unbuttoned shirt,

blissfully unaware of the beast she’s trying to tame.

“Where the fuck were you?”

He never just asks a question. It’s always growled, sharp and restless, like he’s barely leashed.

I ignore the tension crackling off him as I head over to the bar for a drink. “Just dealing with a loose end.”

The Wolf narrows his eyes, shoulders coiled tight.

“What kind of loose end?”

I let the silence stretch, make him wait for an answer I don’t intend to give.

The Wolf is wound too tight. Always restless, always hunting. He thrives on bloodshed like it’s oxygen, wears his aggression like a second skin.

The others might enjoy the kill.

The Wolf needs it.

But that’s why we get along so well.

Because I do too.

I shrug, my voice even. “One that's been taken care of.”

He’s silent a moment, dragging a hand through his hair. I swear I can *feel* his grin behind his mask, sharp and feral.

“If you were out spilling blood without me, I’ll be pissed,” he mutters. “I’m starving.”

The woman in his lap laughs softly, clueless. She runs her hands through his hair, tugging gently.

She'd better have brought running shoes if she wants to play with him.

No. The Wolf doesn’t "play" at all.

He chases. Hunts. Devours.

The Bull chuckles, pulling my attention to him.

He’s surrounded.

Women cling to him, manicured fingers running over the thick, muscled lines of his shoulders and arms, draping themselves over him as if drawn to his sheer size and power.

He shakes them off, ignoring their pouting protests as he stands from the couch. He steps forward, broad-shouldered and imposing, the dim light casting deep shadows across his heavy frame.

“The Russians are starting to make more noise than usual,” he says. His voice is as always edged with violence, every word an invitation for a fight.

I don’t respond right away, and his mask tilts to me slightly.

“At some point, we do need to talk about this, Hound.”

I glance at him. “Obviously. But we knew as we grew in stature that murmurings from the major families and the various seats of power would be inevitable.”

His hands flex at his sides. His massive shoulders roll slowly.

“Well, there’s a certain head of a certain family who seems ready to start hunting us *now*.”

Yeah. I know who he’s talking about. But it’s not a problem—not *yet*, anyway.

“All I’m saying,” The Bull growls, “is that perhaps it might be a good idea to preemptively take *his* head before he tries to take one of ours.”

That's…not a figure of speech.

Of all of us, The Bull craves violence the most. Not as a necessity. Not even to mete out justice.

He just likes it.

His bloodlust is almost absurd. Where The Wolf needs the kill to feel sane, The Bull enjoys it the way another man might enjoy fine whiskey, savoring every drop.

“The Russians don’t like us,” The Raven observes.

The Bull snorts. “No shit. They don’t like the idea of power they don’t control.”

“More than that,” The Raven says. “They don’t like power they don’t *understand*.”

That’s the truth of it.

The Black Court doesn’t play by anyone’s rules.

Not the Russians'—neither the Iron Table nor the High Council. Not The Italian Commission. Not the various syndicates, or the Yakuza, the Triads, or any of the other seats of power in the underworld.

We are the ones who decide what rules look like.

The Wolf snaps a lighter open and shut, open and shut, flicking the flame with a restless smirk. “So, when do we start cutting throats?”

The Bull chuckles. “I like where your head’s at, Wolf.”

“I know you do,” The Wolf purrs, rolling his neck like a boxer before a fight. “Too much talk lately and not enough action. I say we make an example of someone. Burn a house down. Start stacking bodies. Then they'll get the message.”

I don’t react. I’m not thinking about the Russians. I’m thinking about her. The little dancer who saw more than she should.

Who ran. Who fought.

Who *broke*.

…And who doesn’t realize she belongs to me now.

The sound of a glass clinking against wood makes me glance up. The Stag has finally moved. He doesn’t say anything, which is fairly on-brand for hiim. He just pours himself a drink, his movements precise and unhurried. The whiskey sloshes as he tilts the bottle, and I catch the faint lines of old scars beneath his sleeve.

I notice one of the women watching him from across the room, her gaze slow, considering.

I almost laugh.

She has no idea what she's looking at. She watches him like he's a prize, not realizing he's a curse. Few people understand what lives inside The Stag.

The Bull's bloodlust is loud.

The Wolf's hunger for violence is constant, like mine.

The Raven's is lethal in its secrecy, like the thin blade in the darkness you never see coming.

But The Stag's?

His is buried. Deep. Twisting.

And when he decides to take action, it isn't impulsive. It's calculated. Final and absolute.

I watch as he swirls his glass and takes a sip. Then, silent as ever, he sets his glass down with a deliberate clink, the sound barely audible over the low hum of conversation. Then, he speaks.

"Are we ready?"

The rest of us glance at each other and nod.

It's time. The final note of any night where Court has been in session.

The chatter around us continues, the women still draped across the furniture, sipping wine and whispering among themselves about the men they'll never truly have.

The five of us move toward the heavy iron door at the far end of the room. The crowd doesn't follow. They wouldn't dare.

We step through, and the door groans shut behind us. The inner sanctum is smaller, darker. No velvet. No crystal. No old wooden shelves with leather books. No watching eyes. Just stone walls and the weight of the ages.

The air is thicker in here, heavier.

A single fire burns low, casting long shadows against the carved oak table in the room's center.

We don't speak as we move toward our places.

The Raven reaches for the whiskey bottle, pouring a slow measure into five waiting glasses.

One by one, we take them.

We lift our masks.

No one outside this room has ever seen us like this, nor ever will.

We look at each other—not as masked shadows, not as the myths whispered about in the dark corners of the criminal underworld.

Just as who we are.

Five men.

For a moment, no one speaks. Then, together, we raise our glasses. The words fall from our lips, a vow etched into our very souls.

"Potentia per umbras."

Power through shadows.

The Black Court is now adjourned.

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6

CARMINE

SOME SEATS of power were built.

My family’s was *claimed*.

I slide out of the driver's seat of the matte black Lamborghini Aventador, pausing to glance up at the towering 5th Avenue home.

The Barone mansion is a relic from a bygone era, standing up defiantly to time, wealth, and anyone who’s tried—and then failed—to take it. A hulking, French Renaissance fortress, its limestone façade glares over Central Park like it owns the whole goddamn city. Maybe, in some ways, it does.

New York has changed around it, steel and glass rising to stifle the past. But this house hasn’t moved, bent, or cracked since my great-grandfather, Giovanni Barone, won it in an honest-to-God card game during Prohibition.

Back then, New York was the wild fucking west. A city ripe for the picking for men with ambition and a willingness to do whatever it took.

Giovanni came from Tuscany, where his family had been winemakers for generations. When he stepped off the boat in New York, he saw immediately that this place wasn’t built for the dreamers. It was built for the *takers*.

So… He took.

He started small—bootlegging, backroom deals, running numbers for the right people. Then he got bigger. Smarter. Bloodier.

Eventually, he was the one setting the rules.

And the house?

Some millionaire playboy with more money than brains sat across a card table from my great-grandfather one night and bet the mansion on a bad hand, probably after too much bootleg whiskey.

Giovanni ended up taking the deed home, and it's been the seat of power for the Barone empire ever since.

It's seen wars, power struggles, assassinations, love affairs, betrayals. It's housed both the men who built this empire and those who bled to keep it. And someday, it'll be mine.

I try *daily* not to dwell too much on that.

I adjust my cufflinks as I approach the grand front entrance, shaking off the remnants of last night. I don't bring the Court home with me—not to family.

Here, I'm just Carmy.

Roguishly charming. Sarcastic. Fun. Maybe sometimes a little too much of a playboy.

Honestly? It's all just another mask. But it's the one I wear best.

Leo and Sal, two of my father's long-time guards, give me quick nod as I approach the front door. Before they can open it, though, a black town car pulling up to the curb pulls my attention back around.

Bianca cracks the door open before the car can even come to a stop, still wearing ballet tights and a cropped sweatshirt, an enormous bag slung over one shoulder, her hair still twisted into a tight bun.

"Wait wait wait!" she blurts, shutting the car door before any of Pop's guys can even try to do it. "I can't be the last one in!"

I grin, arching a brow and folding my arms over my chest.

“Really pushing the limits on the ‘casual’ part of ‘casual formal attire', aren’t you.”

She rolls her eyes and flips me off.

“I was at work, okay? Besides, that rule is just for you guys.”

Sunday dinner has always been a big thing with Vito. I mean, hello: Italian family. But this whole “dress sharp for it” thing is more recent, possibly stemming from his forays into cooking dinner himself as of about a year ago.

At least his cooking has gotten substantially better. Thank God. At first, I gotta say, it felt almost insulting to be asked to dress up for legit vomit-inducing undercooked poultry or blackened lasagna.

I mean, I’m a shitty Catholic who has no fucking idea who any of the saints are. But I’m confident whichever one is in charge of cooking put a fucking hex on our house and probably offed themselves into the bargain after seeing Pop murder something basic like *cacio e pepe*.

I frown. “What you mean, 'you guys'?”

“I mean you *guys*. The boys.” She shrugs, grinning. “Dad doesn’t care if I dress up.”

“What makes you think that?”

Bianca winks. “Because I’m his *priiiincesss*,” she teases.

I roll my eyes, and she cracks up.

Bianca is one of the few people in the world who sees me and doesn’t expect any power plays or politics. Just family.

And believe me, anyone who once felt the need to mention her not *technically* being my blood has long since learned to shut the fuck up.

Bianca, like her brother Dante, have been Barones since the day my father took them in.

Their old man, Angelo Sartorre, was our dad’s tailor and close friend, one of the few people Vito trusted implicitly. When Angelo died, leaving his

kids with no one, my father didn’t hesitate.

He opened his home and raised them as his own.

Dante was already almost a man back then, but Bianca was just a kid. Now she’s standing here, all grown up, *married*, carrying her oversized bag like she didn’t just spend the last four hours ruining her body at rehearsal.

I shake my head. “You’re a masochist, you know that?”

She frowns. “Excuse me?”

“Ballet.” I gesture at the kinesiology tape wrapped around her calf. “You literally make a career out of destroying yourself and calling it art.”

She huffs. “You literally make a career out of destroying *others* and calling it business.”

“Fair.” I grin. “Wanna switch jobs? You can run the criminal empire, I’ll wear the tutu and jump around on stage.”

She snorts. “Please. You’d last five *minutes* in my world.”

I’ve seen Bianca dance enough, seen the wounds she carries home. Five minutes is generous. I doubt I’d last *one*.

I glance at her bag again, at the tape still wrapped around her leg.

I think of the other dancer.

The one I caught.

The one who ran.

The one who is still in my fucking head, the phantom pressure of her body still lingering against my hands.

Bianca's brows lift slightly. “What?”

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

She doesn’t push. Never does. Bianca, more than most people, understands that there's much more to me than the charming, cocky exterior I present to

the world. She been quite blunt in the past about the…*darker* angels of my nature.

Probably because even though she was being a sarcastic *brat* a second ago, she’s not wrong. She's “the princess” in our family. And at times I’ve let my dark, inner monster out to protect and shield her.

Like the time when she was in 8th grade, and some little fuck at school lifted her skirt and snapped pictures of her ass.

Needless to say, the shit-stain learned two very important life-long lessons. One, don’t be a creep. And more importantly, two, do not, under any circumstances, *ever* fuck with a Barone.

And all it cost him was a broken nose and jaw. I would say that’s getting off more than easy.

Have I ever felt badly about that? Considering Bianca is ten years younger than me, which means I was like twenty-four when I was breaking a junior high school kid's face?

Nope.

Am I supposed to?

Bianca shifts her bag on her shoulder as we climb the steps to the front door. Sal and Leo bow stiffly again, the latter offering to help her as they open the door for us. Bianca politely declines with a smile, asking them both how they and their families are.

Considering the not-so-hidden darker tendencies that Nico, Dante, and I all harbor, it feels like proof of cosmic balance that Bianca ended up so *good*.

I glance at her. “Where’s your husband, by the way?”

She smirks. “Already here, helping Dad with dinner.”

I cross myself dramatically, offering up a prayer of gratitude. Bianca cracks up as we step inside.

“Come on!” she laughs. “Dad’s gotten *way* better!”

“Yeah, thanks to Kratos, Sunday dinners with Pop have stopped being a near-death experience,” I grunt. “Do you remember that turkey dinner he tried to whip up himself before your husband started pitching in?”

Bianca makes a face, holding her stomach like she’s going to be sick. “Yeah. That one was especially egregious.”

“Fuckin’ thing was so rare it might as well have still been gobbling.”

My sister bursts out laughing again, and for a second we just stand there: me with my jovial mask on, Bianca carefree.

It’s moments like this that make me forget that I wear a different face for almost every room I walk into.

Forget that my hands were on a woman’s throat just last night. That I hunted her through the dark, that I made her break and then reveled in it.

Forget that someday soon, I’ll be taking my father’s place as head of the family.

I let out a slow breath. Then I sling an arm around Bianca’s shoulders.

“Come on, ballerina. Let’s eat before Pop starts pulling a Gordon Ramsay.”

She laughs and we step inside the house together.

The rich smell of slow-cooked garlic and tomatoes hits me the second we enter, and my stomach growls viciously. Yeah, that’s the smell of Sunday dinner at the Barone house.

We bump into Kratos first, almost literally, as we step into the dining room. This isn’t difficult to do, given that the guy is almost seven feet tall and about two hundred and seventy pounds of solid muscle.

He turns, a large grin instantly spreading across his face as his eyes drop to my sister.

“I believe *this* belongs to me,” he murmurs, deftly plucking her out from where my arm is over her shoulder, pulling her into him.

Bianca blushes and rolls her eyes, halfheartedly trying to push him away.

“*Stop*, I’m gross. I was running late and haven’t showered yet.”

“Good,” Kratos grins, trapping her against his body and lifting her chin and gaze to his with one massive hand. “I love the smell of sweat on you.” His brow cocks. “And the taste.”

“Dude, I’m standing *right fucking here*,” I grunt, making a face and glaring at my brother-in-law.

Bianca laughs. Kratos shrugs unapologetically. “That sounds like a you problem, Carmy.”

“Let’s keep it PG during family dinner at least?” I mutter.

“Hey, I’m a perfect gentleman,” Kratos snorts in a deep, baritone chuckle.

“*No you’re not.*” Bianca giggles quietly as she stands up on her tiptoes. She *still* has to pull him down to kiss him.

Any other man—and I mean that literally—getting this cozy with Bianca in our own house, I’d already have him splayed out on the table like a medical dissection, using steak knives to remove his organs.

But when you save my sister’s life you earn my respect, so Kratos gets a pass from the hungry monster lurking under my skin. Besides, he makes her happier than I’ve ever seen her, constantly.

So I leave the two of them to paw each other like love-sick puppies as I turn to the rest of my family.

Dante is watching his wife with all the wariness of a man who knows he’s already lost the battle.

Dante runs Club Venom, the most exclusive, underground kink club in the city where the dark, dangerous and deviant indulge in their blackest vices. Tempest, his wife, is his opposite in every way. She’s loud and brassy with a gothy aesthetic and has zero respect for Dante’s need for order. She also loves making him miserable.

I like her.

“Tempest,” he says slowly, dire warning in every syllable.

She doesn’t even look up, just keeps fussing with the food on the antipasto platter, rearranging the olives, stacking cheese cubes like little Lego towers.

“What?” she asks, batting her eyes and popping an olive into her mouth.

“You don’t have to *touch* everything.”

She giggles, turning to grin impishly at him. “See, that’s your problem. You own a literal sex club, but you’re allergic to fun.”

I snort, dropping into my usual chair. Tempest is still grinning as she turns to me. “Hey Carm.”

“Tempest,” I grin, watching as she tosses another olive in the air as if to catch it in her mouth. She misses, and it bounces off her chin and rolls down Dante’s white dress shirt into his lap as his wife cracks up.

He sighs heavily.

“Hey, *you* married *me*,” Tempest smirks, turning to plant a kiss on his cheek.

“I seem to remember being tricked into that.”

Tempest grins. “And yet, here you still are.”

“Every single day, I reevaluate that particular life choice,” Dante says.

“Admit it,” she sing-songs, nudging his wine glass out of place just to watch him fix it again. “You’d die without me.”

Dante exhales slowly, like he’s gathering patience from the deepest recesses of his soul.

“Little hurricane, you are *incapable* of sitting still.”

Tempest pops a piece of Provolone in her mouth, chewing thoughtfully. “That’s not true. I sit still when I’m asleep,” she finally offers.

“You *kick me* in your sleep.”

She shrugs. “Not my problem.”

Dante presses his fingers to his temples, breathing deeply. “You're going to kill me,” he murmurs. “Slowly. Painfully.”

Tempest beams. “Please. I’m a fucking *delight*.”

Dante stares at her for a long moment. Then, slowly, he leans in, his voice dropping.

“Yes, you are,” he murmurs, his tone rough and warm all at once.

Tempest blinks, startled, a prosciutto slice halfway to her open mouth.

I can’t help but laugh.

That’s how it always goes with them: she pushes, teases, causes utter chaos, and just when she thinks she’s in control, Dante reminds her exactly how much she belongs to him.

The other door to the dining room suddenly swings open and I glance up as Nico walks in with Pop, the former holding two bottles of Barolo from the cellar.

Sixty-two years old, tanned as hell, and still handsome as fuck, Vito somehow always manages to walk the fine line between gangster chic and smooth Italian finesse. The guy dresses like a king—all Armani, all the time—but still has a little bit of the streets on him. The gold chain glinting against his chest with the top few buttons of his shirt undone. A classy, modern haircut that makes him look like a movie star but doesn’t quite cover the cauliflower ears of a man who spent his youth brawling for turf.

“The gang’s all here!” Vito grins, arms wide as he takes in the room.

He’s been saying that since we were kids.

Back then, it was when we piled into the living room for Saturday morning cartoons or he picked us up from school. Now, it’s when we gather at the family estate, our conversation about power struggles, alliances, and the empire we’ll inherit.

Bianca is the first to reach him. She wraps her arms around him tightly, and Vito plants a loud, exaggerated kiss on her forehead.

“My beautiful girl.” He cups her face, beaming before his brow furrows. “Look at you. You don’t eat anymore? You’re all bone!”

“Dad, I eat plenty,” Bianca sighs, smiling.

“Yeah, yeah,” he waves her off. “Still my *bellissima ballerina*.”

His gaze shifts to me. His grin turns playful but sharp as he walks over. I stand, and the two of us embrace, my nose filling with the familiar scent of him: Italian aftershave, clean linen, and the lingering aroma of a cigar I’m betting he had earlier while listening to Sinatra.

“Remind me later,” he nods as we pull apart. “I need to talk to you about an opportunity we might want to jump on, fast.”

I cock a brow. “Yeah?”

“What kind of opportunity?” Nico adds as he joins us, rubbing his palm over his jawline.

Vito pulls closer to the two of us, lowering his voice. “Word has it, Andrei Mushkin got one of those summons…” He clears his throat, his voice lowering even more. “From those Black Court psychos.”

My brow knits, but Nico and I don’t even look at each other.

That’s just how it is.

The Black Court might be infamous throughout the underworld, but no one —*no one*—knows who we, the Shadow Kings, really are. Not even our families.

We don’t talk about what happens there once we leave. Outside those walls, if The Bull and I were to sit down in a social or business situation—which we frequently do—we address each other with our real names. Just as in Court, we only address each other using our Shadow names.

“Oh yeah?” I say evenly.

Pop nods. “Yeah. Word is, Mushkin’s been missing the last few days.”

Nico snorts. “I dunno, Dad. I think this whole black court thing is just a mafia world ghost story.”

Vito doesn't even blink. "It's not," he grunts. "That shit is *real*. Either way, Mushkin's gone missing, his people are losing their shit trying to keep it quiet, and I think we all know what that means for those warehouses of his in Queens."

I nod slowly. Then, Pop shakes his head.

"Not a conversation for right now. I just wanted to put that in your heads."

"Hey, you're the boss, Pop."

He smiles and claps me on the shoulder. "Not forever, kiddo." He clears his throat as he turns and rubs his hands together, looking pleased. "All right, all right, everyone, take your seats. Dinner is ready. But first, a toast."

Nico uncorks one of the bottles with practiced ease, pouring deep red wine into each waiting glass as we all take our places around the table. Vito stands at the head of the table, lifts his glass, and we all follow suit.

"*Alla famiglia*," he says with a warm smile.

To family.

"To the past that shaped us, the present that binds us, and the future that awaits us."

He clears his throat, frowning slightly before raising his glass again.

"May our hands remain steady, our hearts remain strong, and may we always find our way home."

We clink glasses, laughter and conversation swelling again.

Except suddenly, something's wrong.

Pop is still standing, his glass aloft. But he's not taking a sip, and his face is twisted in a grimace.

"Dad?" Bianca blurts.

I watch it happen in slow motion. Vito staggers back, his glass slipping from his grip and shattering against the floor, red wine pooling like spilled blood on the floorboards.

Then he drops.

Fuck.

No.

Bianca screams.

Nico lunges forward, catching Pop just before he hits the ground.

Tempest gasps, her chair scraping back as she jumps to her feet.

Kratos is already shoving the table aside, Dante moving swiftly to help lower Vito onto the floor.

I drop beside him, hands gripping his shoulders.

“Pop,” I choke out. “POP!”

This isn’t how this happens. Vito Barone isn’t supposed to *collapse at family dinner*.

“Someone call a fucking ambulance!” Nico roars.

This isn’t happening.

Pop’s face is ashen, his breathing shallow.

His eyes meet mine. For the first time in my life, Vito Barone looks afraid.

And for the first time in my life—

So am I.

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7

LYRA

“Psychopathy is one of the most studied yet misunderstood conditions in forensic psychology.”

I twirl my pen between my fingers, only half-listening as Professor Armitage paces at the front of the lecture hall.

“A true psychopath lacks empathy and the ability to form genuine emotional connections. They can, however, be very charming, and incredibly skilled at mimicking normal human behavior. This is what makes them so dangerous.”

My fingers tighten on my pen as the memory flashes through my mind.

Cold, unyielding stone pressing against my back. Candlelight flickering in my eyes.

The Hound’s breath on my skin, his voice curling around me like smoke.

“Fight back.”

A shudder teases down my spine, a familiar war raging inside me between fear, anxiety, and…something else.

Excitement.

Desire.

The thought should make me sick.

I shouldn’t have wanted it. I shouldn’t still feel the throb of heat between my legs every time I close my eyes at night, my fingers brushing over the places he touched.

“Psychopaths seek control,” Professor Armitage continues. “They’re highly skilled at reading people, understanding their desires, their weaknesses. They enjoy the game of breaking them down.”

My throat tightens.

Because it’s not *just* The Hound snarling into my neck and sinking his fingers between my thighs, making me squirm and gasp for more.

I’m also thinking of my other recent scary encounter: the one with Carmine Barone in the alley behind the Mercury Opera House.

The way he stood in the shadows outside the theater, staring down into my face, blocking my path.

The way he touched my throat, fingers pressing just enough to remind me how much power he held.

I shift uncomfortably in my seat, trying to force the thoughts away.

Two encounters with two different men. And yet, they made me feel the same way: terrified.

Afraid.

Excited.

And turned on.

Sourness curdles in my stomach as I try to focus on the Behavioral Studies lecture.

“Psychopaths seek control,” Professor Armitage continues, her hands moving expressively as she speaks. “What makes a psychopath truly dangerous isn’t just their capacity for violence…”

My mind flashes to the brutal sound of a blade cutting flesh, to blood spraying across the stone floor like spilled wine, the thick, iron-slick scent of it filling my nostrils as I tried to keep dancing.

“It’s their ability to blend in, to manipulate those around them into believing they are something they aren't. They perform emotions they don’t feel. They learn your vulnerabilities without you realizing it, and may use those vulnerabilities to their advantage.”

I press my lips together, thinking of the man who chased me through a dark, cavernous labyrinth, who whispered filthy, terrifying things into my ear as his fingers pushed me over the edge.

The thing is, whether he knows it or not, he *is* using my vulnerabilities against me. In a sane or rational world, I’d never even *consider* going back to that place.

Except “sane” and “rational” are currently taking a back seat to the cold reality that I need to come up with five thousand dollars a fucking *week* to pay back Arkadi’s debt. And the only way I can possibly think of to get that kind of money is to do exactly what I shouldn’t after what happened the other night: go *back* to that place.

Back to *him*.

My body reacts to the memories before my brain can stop it—a flush creeping up my neck, a pulse beating low in my stomach, a tight ache curling deep within me.

Shame burns in my chest.

Why the hell was I turned on by any of that—vividly, feverishly so?

What the *fuck* is wrong with me?

“Many psychopaths operate in positions of power. They thrive in places where manipulation and ruthlessness are considered assets, not weaknesses.”

I exhale sharply and drag a hand through my hair, trying to focus, forcing the thoughts down.

Professor Armitage steps to the front of the stage, clasping her hands in front of her.

“In summary, the defining trait of a psychopath is simple: they do not stop.”

* * *

THE AIR OUTSIDE is crisp and biting, the afternoon sky pale and overcast. I tuck my hands in my pockets, my bag slung over my shoulder as I head for the subway to go uptown for rehearsal. My phone presses against my palm, sending a nervous tick through my fingers.

I should message Brooklyn's contact about another job.

I ended up texting Milena, whose family is Bratva, asking her if she knew a "Mr. Popov"; I claimed I'd heard some guys giving my local bodega owner a hard time, and mentioning that name. Milena said that it was most likely a guy named Grigori Popov, a mid-level Russian gangster who Milena characterized as a "serious lunatic".

Apparently, I have a neon sign over my head welcoming those into my life lately. *Great*.

A shiver ripples up my spine as I yet again replay the sordid details of the other night. But this time, I shove them down as I pull my phone out of my pocket. It hasn't been a full week yet since Grigori's guys kicked in our door. But if I'm going to be magically producing five thousand dollars a week, I'm going to need to go back to wherever that was and dance again—

A hand grabs my arm, and I yelp.

I'm barely able to react before I'm yanked hard into an alley.

Panic explodes in my chest as my back slams against the brick wall, my breath leaving me in a sharp gasp.

The same two guys from the other night—Grigori Popov's men—leer down at me.

"Well, now," the taller one sneers, his lip curled. "Look what we have here."

His partner leans in, his gaze trailing down my body. "You been avoiding us, little girl?"

I shake my head frantically, heart slamming against my ribs. “It—it hasn’t been a week yet!”

The taller one smirks. “If you don’t have it *now*, I’m not sure how the *fuck* you think you’re going to get it in two—”

“I have it!” I blurt.

Well, most of it.

With trembling fingers, I dig into my bag, pulling out the envelope I was handed as I was dropped off the other night.

It’s not the full five grand. I mean, we had to *eat*, and I pulled a thousand out to set aside for rent. That’s why I’ve been working up the nerve to text the contact again, asking when I can dance again for more money.

The shorter one yanks the envelope out of my hand, flips through the bills.

His face darkens.

“You’re short,” he growls.

My pulse kicks into overdrive.

“I—I know, but it hasn’t been a full week yet,” I plead, my voice wavering.

He grunts. The taller one watches me closely, a slow grin spreading across his face.

“You know,” he murmurs, “there are *other* ways to pay off a debt.”

Disgust seeps through me, like sour milk.

“Pretty little thing like you?” He grins lecherously. “You know how to work a cock, baby?”

My face pales as I draw back from him.

He chuckles. “Trust me, if sucking *my dick* got you off the hook with Mr. Popov, I’d have had you on your knees two minutes ago.”

Fuck you.

“Maybe you should be out there using what God gave you to make that money, hmm?”

I shake my head violently, and the man shrugs.

“Just a suggestion. Believe me, turning tricks is *way* better than what will happen if you miss a payment to Mr. Popov.”

He suddenly frowns as his gaze drops to my collarbone. In a panic, my hand flies to the necklace, gripping it like a lifeline.

This belonged to Aunt Alison, whom I never knew and never met. But I had an old photo when I was younger of my father’s sister wearing this necklace with the little ballet slipper pendant, sitting in a rocking chair by a window, holding me as a baby.

There are *zero* pictures of Arkadi or Vera holding me like that or looking at me like people are supposed to look at babies they’re related to. So that one of Aunt Alison holding me, my little hand reaching for the pendant necklace that she ended up leaving me, was always incredibly precious to me.

The taller man slaps my hand away, and his fingers snatch the chain, breaking it as he yanks it roughly from my neck.

No.

I cry out, lurching forward and desperately trying to retrieve it. “Please!” I gasp. “Don’t—”

“It’s collateral, since you’re short,” he chuckles smugly, pocketing the necklace.

“Relax, you’ll get it back,” the other one sneers. “When you pay us what you owe.”

Then, just as fast as they grabbed me, they’re gone.

I'm left there shaking, raw, breathless. And for the first time since this all started, I feel something like hopelessness creeping in.

I need more money.

And I need it *now*.

* * *

I STOP AT THE CORNER, pressing my fingers against my temples, forcing my breath to slow.

I can still feel Popov’s men—grabbing me, their fingers digging into my arms, ripping my necklace away like it was nothing.

Shaking, I tug my phone out of my pocket and scroll to Brooklyn's contact. The last time I called this number, not having any idea what I was getting into, a man with an even, smooth tone interviewed me briefly, then told me where to meet to be picked up for the job. I was, strangely, less nervous then.

Because this time, I know *exactly* what I’m getting myself into as my finger hovers over the dial button, my pulse thudding anxiously in my ears.

Heat curls through my stomach, spreading like a slow burn, embarrassment prickling my skin as memories rush in unbidden.

Of *him*.

The way he chased me. Caught me.

…Everything else that came next. Things I should be disgusted or feel utterly violated by. *Not* events that I should be replaying nightly to myself in my most private thoughts.

I breathe deeply, shoving the memory down where it belongs. Then a darker, more nagging thought takes hold.

Did he tell them?

Did he tell the Court that my blindfold slipped? That I saw something I wasn’t supposed to? Are they even going to *let* me back?

Well, only one way to find out.

I press call.

The line rings once.

Twice.

Then—

A soft chime.

“We’re sorry, the number you have dialed is no longer in service.”

My heart drops.

No.

No, no, no.

I stare at the screen, then hit the call button again.

The same chime. The same flat, robotic voice telling me I’m fucked.

Shit.

I straighten my shoulders, dragging in a steadying breath, slipping everything behind a carefully controlled mask as panic begins to overtake me.

No. This isn’t the time to fall apart. I'll figure it out. Somehow.

I count to three. Then I round the corner.

The alley behind the Mercury Opera House is crowded with dancers, as it usually is at the start of the day. Some stretch against the railing despite the cold, others sip coffee or smoke cigarettes, huddled together in quiet conversation.

It’s an unspoken ritual, this lingering. The calm before the storm. Because the second we step through those doors, we stop belonging to ourselves.

Inside, we are Madame Kuzmina’s.

I spot Milena and Naomi immediately. Naomi is bundled up in a scarf, her dark hair piled into a tight bun, her hands wrapped around a steaming coffee. Milena is bare-shouldered despite the chill, and her sleek blonde ponytail swishes when she turns at the sound of my footsteps.

“Hey!” Milena says, a small grin curling her pouty lips. “We were about to send a search party.”

Naomi huffs, blowing on her coffee. “She’s literally two minutes later than usual.”

“Exactly,” Milena teases. “*Highly* suspicious.”

Naomi rolls her eyes, smiling. “You and your Bratva paranoia.”

Milena winks. “Survival instinct, *solnishka.*”

I laugh, stepping into their circle, letting their banter settle over me like a blanket.

Milena is one of my closest friends. Confident, beautiful, with an effortless cool that makes people gravitate toward her.

But still—she’s a Kalishnik. Her father, Marko, is the head of the Kalishnik Bratva. Milena doesn’t talk about it much, but she doesn’t have to.

I know what it means.

Milena grew up in the same world that I did. But she was raised as a princess within it.

I was a prisoner of it.

Naomi, meanwhile, is the opposite of both of us. A "good girl", born into a privileged if suffocating life. Her father, Leonard Kim, is a congressman, her mother a retired ballerina turned socialite.

And yet, I know it would be naive to say that unlike Milena and me, she has the option to run away from it all.

…Because I’m not actually sure she *does*.

Naomi takes a slow sip of her coffee, sighing as she stares at the theater doors. “I swear, if Madame Kuzmina makes me run the fouettés today, I’m going to fake an injury and take up pottery.”

Milena smirks. “You’re playing Odile. Fouettés are *kind of* a key part of the job description.”

Naomi groans. “Yeah, well, Odile needs a union rep. This is starting to feel like workplace abuse.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “I mean, if you want to switch, I’ll happily take the role off your hands—”

“Over my dead body,” Naomi mutters.

Milena grins, tossing her ponytail over her shoulder. “Hey, I'm a cygnet. In the middle! Those *pas de chats*, I keep worrying I'm going to smack my neighbor's knee. Why couldn't I at least be on the end?” She puts the back of her hand to her forehead dramatically.

Naomi stretches, groaning. “I think Kuzmina is going to be *extra* hard on me this week.”

“Why?” I ask.

“She thinks my Odile isn't *mean* enough,” Naomi huffs. “She wants me to ‘summon my darkness'.”

“Uh, *hello*?” Milena points at herself, grinning. “Bratva princess here. You’re welcome to my TED Talk on inner darkness any time, lady.”

Naomi snorts. “I’ve seen you three margaritas deep, rocking Britney Spears at karaoke. I have a hard time seeing you as *dark* after that.”

“*Fine*,” Milena waves her off. “Then ask Lyra. She’s got darkness to spare.”

That hits a little too close to home.

I force a tight smile as we all laugh, but something inside me itches, coils, burns.

“C’mon, let's get in there before Kuzmina sends her flying monkeys.”

We’re heading for the door when I get a tap on the shoulder. I turn to see Brooklyn looking at me, tightness in her expression.

“See you in there,” I say to Naomi and Milena before I let Brooklyn pull me aside.

“I’ve been worried about you,” she says, biting her lip.

I force an easy smile to my lips. “I told you, I’m totally fine!”

We texted the other night, after…what happened. I had *dozens* of missed calls and texts from her, because she was terrified for me when she didn't see me in the dressing room afterward along with everyone else.

She frowns. “Lyra, when you didn’t come back…”

My stomach knots.

I do *not* plan on telling her what happened.

“I told you,” I say lightly. “That voice in my earbuds told me to stay behind to dance a little longer, that’s all.”

She exhales, looking down. “I tried waiting for you, but they made me leave.”

I squeeze her arm. “All good.”

But it’s not all good. Not when I continuously, constantly, keep thinking of that chase, making something tingle inside me.

We turn for the door, but I can’t help myself.

“Hey, I…” I clear my throat as Brooklyn glances back at me curiously. “I went to call that number. You know, to see about dancing again…”

“Yeah—disconnected, right?”

The tension melts a little from around my chest at the easy way Brooklyn says it, like it’s to be expected.

“They do that.” She shrugs. “Security thing, I guess. They burn the number after every gig.”

Thank God.

So that’s why the number was no longer in service. Not because they know I saw. Not because The Hound told them I came on his fingers.

I exhale, my shoulders lowering as the stress melts out of them.

“They’ll text you from a new number when they—”

Her phone dings loudly, as if on cue. Brooklyn pulls it out of her pocket and grins.

“See? Speak of the devil.”

She turns the phone to me, displaying a message from an unsaved number that simply reads “further instructions forthcoming.”

I pull my phone out, my eyes dropping to the screen.

No text.

Fuck.

“I’ll reach out,” Brooklyn says quietly, flashing me a forced smile. “I’m sure it’s an oversight. I mean, they asked you to stay longer last time, right?”

“Yeah, no, totally,” I mumble, trying not to spiral. “Anyway, we should head in.”

Inside the theater, the dressing room is buzzing, with dancers huddled together, whispering.

“What’s going on?” I ask as we walk over to Naomi and Milena.

Milena’s brow furrows as she turns. “It’s Bianca’s dad,” she says. “Apparently he had a heart attack last night.”

Holy shit.

“Vito Barone?”

She nods. “He got to hospital in time, but *fuck*. Can you imagine your dad—”

Her mouth snaps shut instantly, and I catch the cold glare Naomi shoots her way. I shake my head.

“Guys, it’s fine,” I laugh—maybe a bit too loudly. “You can say the word ‘dad’ around me. I’m not going to turn to stone or anything.”

He has no power over you.

Not anymore.

Just then, the dressing room door swings open, and Bianca walks in, her face pale, her eyes red-rimmed.

The conversation dies, and for a moment, no one knows what to say.

Finally Naomi steps forward, hugging her. “Are you okay?”

Bianca lets out a soft breath. “Yeah—I mean, *no*, but…” She shakes her head. “He’s stable now. That’s all that matters.”

Milena rubs her back. “How are you?”

Bianca lets out a short laugh. “A fucking wreck. But we’re working through it. For now, it’s making sure it doesn’t happen again. Then we figure out what comes next.” Her mouth twists into a wry grin as she looks up at us. “Actually, that’s the one amusing thing about all of this…”

Naomi frowns. “What is?”

“Carmine has to get married now.”

I blink. “What?”

Bianca nods. “They're sure Dad’s going to be just fine. But I think it was a huge wake-up call for him. He’s gotta start eating better, slowing down, taking stress off his plate.” She looks around and leans closer to the three of us. “Look, please don’t share this yet. But…” She swallows. “Dad’s stepping down. Carmine’s going to be taking his place.”

Milena lets out a low whistle. “*Damn*. I thought your brother wasn’t in any hurry to take over.”

“He’s not,” Bianca mutters, rubbing her temples tiredly. “But it is what it is. He’s Dad’s oldest heir, so…”

Naomi tilts her head. “But why does he have to get married?”

Bianca's expression is flat, unimpressed. “Some old-school crap about how the head of the family needs a wife.” She snorts. “I mean, bullshit, but *amusing* bullshit if you’re me. Can you imagine *Carmine* of all people married?”

Milena snickers. “I mean… He’s hot.”

“Milena!”

“What?” she laughs. “I’m just stating fact. All your brothers are.”

Biance wrinkles her nose.

“Is he even seeing anyone?” Naomi asks.

Bianca leans against the lockers. “Nope. So, get this, he’s holding *auditions* tonight. Like it’s the fucking *Bachelor*.” She shakes her head. “*And* it gets better. Whoever he picks? He’s offering them a million dollars.”

Sharp hunger twists in my stomach.

One. Million. Dollars.

I think of the men, coming to collect my father’s debt.

I think of my mother slumped on the couch, drowning in her latest bottle.

I think of the fact that I’m most definitely *not* getting called again to dance for the men in the black animal masks.

Bianca sighs. “I pity whoever wins.”

I don’t say anything. I’m already thinking about what it would be like to be the one who does.

To have that kind of money.

To finally, *finally*, be free.

And suddenly, I know exactly where I’ll be tonight.

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8

LYRA

THE BARONE MANSION IS RIDICULOUS.

It's not just big—it's opulent in that old-world, aristocratic Italian way. All stone and carved balconies, vast windows that reflect the city lights, stairs leading up to massive double doors that probably alone cost more than my rent.

I've walked by it before—I mean the thing is *right* across the street from the 79th street entrance to Central Park. I just never realized that *this* was the Barone house.

God DAMN, Bianca…

Now that I'm here, standing in the grand marble foyer, trying not to gawk at the high ceilings and gold accents, I wonder if I've made a mistake.

This house doesn't feel like a home.

It feels like a fortress.

And right now, I am *wildly* out of place.

After giving my name to a man in a suit with an iPad, I glance around, taking stock of the competition. Most of them are mafia, that much is obvious. Polished, poised, wearing expensive dresses. In the criminal world, marrying into the Barone empire would be a *huge* connection for any family. So they've sent their daughters.

Some huddle together in small clusters, whispering and gossiping, picking at manicured fingernails. Others sit alone, reading the room with sharp gazes.

I'm honestly debating turning around and leaving when I hear a familiar voice behind me.

"Lyra?"

Mother. Fucker.

Milena.

I cringe, my stomach twisting. Just showing up here was already hell on my anxiety. But bumping into someone I know?

Shoot me.

With a groan, I force a neutral expression on my face and turn to face her.

She looks me up and down. "Okay, explain. What the *hell* are you doing here?"

"What are…*you* doing here?"

Truly masterful reply, self.

She gestures to the crowd of girls in the living room.

"To watch the absolute *train wreck* of this night unfold," she giggles quietly, leaning into me. "Same as you, I assume?"

I let out a nervous laugh, playing along.

"I mean, *look* at them," Milena continues, amused. "Can you imagine showing up to something like this, hoping some man *picks you* to be his wife? Like, what year is it? *Gross.*"

"Hah, yeah, seriously," I mumble. "Gross," I nod, pretending to agree.

But that's *exactly* what I'm here to do.

Unlike Milena, I don't have the luxury of watching this for entertainment. I'm here because I need the money.

I'm all out of options.

Before I can dwell on it, the energy in the room shifts and a few girls go quiet, their gazes flicking to the entrance.

I turn to follow their stares. I have no idea who the girl is that's just waltzed in, but she's around my age, and she's freaking *gorgeous*.

Not just pretty. The kind of beautiful that turns heads everywhere. Dark hair, tan skin, and crazy intense emerald-green eyes.

She's impeccably put together—high heels clicking on the marble, a designer dress hugging her curves, her hair done in a way that makes her look both glamorous and like it's no effort at all.

Milena watches her skeptically. "Now *that's* interesting."

I glance at her. "Why? Who is that?"

"Gabriella De Luca."

The name doesn't mean squat to me, but it clearly does to the other girls here.

Milena leans in, lowering her voice. "As in Nero De Luca's younger sister."

Still blank.

Milena sighs. "Jesus, Lyra, do you pay *any* attention to mafia world gossip?"

"Should I?"

She rolls her eyes. "Well—the De Lucas and the Barones don't exactly *love* each other. They're do business together, but it's…prickly. So I hear, at least."

I watch as Gabriella makes her way to the living room, ignoring the stares she's getting.

"Plus," Milena continues, "there's no way in hell Gabriella needs money."

Fair. I mean, the girl is dressed head to toe in Versace and looks like she bathes in champagne and diamonds every morning.

“And,” Milena adds, “there is no fucking way her brother would be okay with her even being here.”

“Why not?” I ask.

Milena lets out a low laugh. “Because Nero’s *insane*.”

I raise a brow. “That bad?”

“*Worse* than bad,” she says. “The guy’s got major control issues. Psychopath-level. Huge fucking ego, too. God’s gift to the world. You know, basically a one-man red flag parade. If he finds out Gabriella’s here, this place is gonna turn into a *crime scene*.”

Before I can ask another question, the air suddenly shifts again as a new presence fills the doorway.

Milena groans. “*Fuck*, here we go.” She makes a face, nodding her chin at the tall, darkly handsome built guy entering the living room. “Presenting Nero.”

Gabriella swept into the room like she owned it. Her older brother, meanwhile, struts in like he owns the entire *world*, and expects it to drop to its collective knee and kiss his ring.

He looks almost like a fighter. Dark brown hair, just tousled enough to make it clear he doesn’t give a shit, a boldly Italian look, and the same bright green eyes as his younger sister, assessing everyone in the room as either useful or worthless. Which just seems like such an unnecessary trait for someone with his chiseled bone structure and ridiculously good looks.

Tattoos peek from beneath the collar of his black dress shirt, curling over his forearms.

The room goes silent as he steps in, two big guys in suits right behind him. Everything about him radiates control, confidence, and an unsettling sort of violent energy.

His gaze finally lands on Gabriella and his jaw sets.

Milena, still watching wide-eyed, lets out a low whistle.

“Damn,” she murmurs. “Shit’s about to get *interesting*.”

The tension in the room increases the second Nero starts moving toward Gabriella. He doesn’t rush. He walks like someone who’s never had to force people out of his way because they move the second they see him coming.

Gabriella, however, does not budge.

She unhurriedly pulls an elegant silver cigarette case from her designer purse, opens it, and deftly slips a cigarette between her soft lips. Her green eyes lift as her brother storms over, raising her chin just slightly.

I don’t know a thing about their family dynamic, but I know a power struggle when I see one.

Nero stops in front of her, his gaze razor-sharp. “Time to leave, Gabby," he says curtly, his voice rough.

Gabriella blinks, then lets out a soft huff of amusement. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” Nero murmurs, low and deliberate. “Whatever game you’re playing, it ends now. Let’s *go*. You don’t belong here.”

She tilts her head slightly. “Funny. I was about to say the same to you. I’m confident you rank pretty low on Carmine Barone’s list of wife material.”

A few of the girls shift awkwardly in their seats, pretending not to have heard. Milena, on the other hand, looks like she’s *dying* for some popcorn, extra butter and damn the calories.

Nero doesn’t react, doesn’t blink. Just stares, his posture relaxed but tense underneath.

“You’re making a mistake,” he says.

Gabriella puts the unlit cigarette away, then taps a manicured finger to her lips, mock-pensive. “Wouldn’t be my first. *Probably* won’t be my last.”

“You’re twenty-four years old, Gabby. You shouldn’t need a babysitter to keep you out of trouble.”

“Nor do I want a keeper, and yet, here we are.”

His jaw grinds. “You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into.”

“Wow,” Gabriella deadpans. “*Such* an original argument. Get that trademarked.”

A muscle flexes in Nero’s forearm. “I’m done playing games, Gabriella. We’re leaving. Now.”

She leans in slightly, her voice soft, mocking. “Or you’ll—what? Ground me? Take my phone? Cancel my credit cards?”

Nero lets out a slow breath. “Rossi. Bianchi.”

The two men who entered with him immediately drift forward.

Gabriella takes a step back, her amusement flickering—just briefly—before hardening into something else.

“You *wouldn’t*,” she mutters.

Nero smiles. It’s not friendly. Not even close.

“Wouldn’t I?”

The two guards each grab an arm.

She thrashes, heels slipping and sliding on the polished marble. “Get your fucking hands off me! Goddammit, Nero! You psycho!”

Suddenly, the heavy doors to the study slide open. A gruff-looking Carmine Barone steps out, brows drawn, sleeves pushed up like he was in the middle of something. A terrified-looking young woman scurries out of the study after him, like she can’t *wait* to be done with the interview.

I swallow nervously as my eyes land on the man whose hand was wrapped around my throat in the dark alley the other night.

Carmine’s eyes immediately lock on Nero.

“What the fuck is going on?” he growls.

Nero barely glances at him, the corners of his mouth twitching up in mocking amusement.

“Sorry to crash your…whatever this is,” Nero smirks.

Carmine exhales slowly, rolling his shoulders as he steps forward.

“Keep your family issues under your own roof,” he murmurs quietly to Nero.

“Working on it, pal,” Nero mutters back.

Okay, clearly, they know each other. Well. And whatever "prickliness" between their families Milena was talking about before doesn’t seem to be there right now.

I glance at Milena, who's still watching them with the same keen curiosity.

Nero shrugs, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “Anyway, I’m out of your way as soon as I can take out the trash.”

“*Fuck you*, Nero!” Gabriella fires over her shoulder.

Carmine scoffs, but there’s no humor in it. “C’mon, man. Be nice.” He smirks. “Or maybe I’ll have to pick her for my wife just to piss you off.”

Nero smiles. And holy *shit*, is it a deranged one. More like a flash of teeth from a rabid wild animal before it attacks.

“I think you know me well enough to understand what a godawful idea it is to piss me off.”

Carmine says nothing.

“Anyway, enjoy this…truly romantic occasion, Carmy,” Nero snickers, turning to glance at the girls. He gives Carmine one last nod before he turns, ignoring the hurled curses from his sister as his men drag her out through the front door, with Nero following right behind.

Carmine exhales slowly. “*Fuck*,” he grunts to no one before turning and walking back into his study, closing the doors. Suddenly, I hear a gasp behind us.

“Guys?”

Milena and I spin at the same time to see a confused-looking Bianca staring at us.

“Um…” Her face pales. “What the *fuck* are you doing here?”

Milena giggles quietly. “Don’t worry. We’re just here for the show,” she snickers, elbowing me. “It’s not like either of us are *seriously* here to audition to marry—”

“Lyra Ostrova?”

My spine snaps rigid.

“Ostrova,” the man with the iPad who checked me in earlier grunts, louder this time. “You’re up.”

My face turns bright red as Milena and Bianca both turn to stare at me.

“Dude… What are you doing?” Milena hisses.

“I—I’m sorry,” I blurt, my eyes darting to Bianca. “I’m so sorry.”

And then I turn and scurry over to the man with the iPad.

* * *

CARMINE WATCHES me like a predator deciding if I’m worth the effort of the hunt.

He sits across from me on a low, expensive-looking couch identical to the one I’m sitting on, an arm draped along the back, fingers tapping the leather. Between us, a sleek coffee table gleams in the dim light, separating his world from mine.

My hands twist in my lap. I feel like I’m at the most awkward job interview of all time.

I don’t belong here.

I know it. *He* knows it.

I also don’t have a choice.

Carmine leans forward slightly, the corners of his mouth curving in a slow, mirthless smile.

“Well, well,” he murmurs. “If it isn’t Miss Nobody, who heard nothing.”

My stomach tightens.

It takes a second for me to remember the words from our first meeting in the alley behind the theater, when I was pressed against the wall, his hand wrapped around my throat.

I hold his gaze. “I prefer Lyra, actually.”

His lips twitch, amusement flickering in his eyes.

“Well, *Lyra*, let’s get into it, then. You know this interview was specifically for women from mafia families, right?”

I nod, trying to keep my breathing steady. “I’m aware.”

Carmine tilts his head, studying me like a specimen under a microscope. “You’re Arkadi Ostrov’s daughter.”

I clench my jaw. “Yes.”

Something cold and sharp flashes across his face.

“*Mafia families*,” he repeats, his voice edged. “Not families of a psychopath who kept a harem of teenaged girls locked in a fucking basement before slaughtering them.”

My throat goes tight, but I school my expression, keeping my posture professional—like I’m at a job interview, not sitting in the lion’s den.

“So…” I clear my throat. “Do you have any questions—”

“Stop.”

Carmine’s eyes glint, cruelly amused.

“You really think this is a *normal* conversation?” He leans back against the couch, spreading his arms along the top, completely at ease.

I lift my chin, trying not to hyperventilate. “I thought that was the point of an interview.”

His lips curl into a smirk. “Cute.”

The silence between us stretches out heavily. Then his gaze flicks down, zeroing in on my throat.

His expression shifts—the humor fading, darkness taking its place.

“Where’s your necklace?”

I blink, caught off guard. “What?”

His eyes snap back to mine.

“Your necklace, with the ballet slipper pendant,” he repeats. “You’ve been wearing it whenever I’ve seen you, and you’re not wearing it now. Usually people wear sentimental pieces like necklaces for luck during things like this.”

My stomach drops, heat rising to my cheeks. When the *hell* has this man ever noticed me?

I shrug, trying to downplay it. “I…just didn’t wear it today.”

Carmine doesn’t look convinced. But after a beat, he lets it go, dragging his hand through his hair and sighing.

“All right, let’s cut the shit. This is over,” he says, pushing up from the couch. “Time for you to go.”

Anxiety flashes in my chest and I stand abruptly. “Wait—”

“You’re obviously here because you need the money. But I’m not a charity. You’re done.”

Something inside me snaps.

No.

I can’t afford to walk out of here without this money.

Just as I'm starting to panic, Carmine reaches for a decanter, his other hand gripping a crystal tumbler as he splashes whiskey into it.

…Which is exactly when one of the lights in the room glints off a ring on his finger.

Simple. Gold.

With a gleaming black gem.

Instantly, my whole body goes still as my reality shifts.

Holy fuck.

I know that ring. I've *felt* that ring between my legs.

Tasted it with my tongue.

No.

It's not possible.

The man who chased me through the labyrinth, pinned me against the stone wall and touched me like he owned me…

He's standing in front of me.

And his name isn't The Hound.

It's Carmine fucking Barone.

Carmine knocks back half his drink, rolling his neck before he lowers the glass and turns back to me.

"I said we're done, Miss Nobody. Get the fuck—"

"You're going to pick me."

Slowly, his brow furrows, his lips curling into a curious and thoroughly unamused smile.

"Now why the hell would I do that?" he growls.

I lift my chin, steeling myself.

“Because,” I say, voice calm but razor-sharp, “if you don’t, I’ll tell everyone about your fondness for dog masks and chasing girls through underground mazes.”

The air between us throbs with a dark, lethal energy that turns my legs to jelly.

Carmine goes completely, unnervingly still, whiskey glass halfway to his lips, the ice inside shifting with a soft clink. His fingers tighten around the rocks glass, just slightly. With excruciating slowness, he sets it down on the bar cart—a quiet, controlled click of crystal against wood.

Then he moves.

Fast.

Before I can react, he’s already shoving the coffee table aside like it’s nothing, making it scrape so suddenly and violently against the floor that I flinch.

My heart climbs into my throat, choking off my scream. I backpedal instinctively, but my legs hit the couch.

Then, I’m falling.

The cushion catches me, but before I can scramble up, Carmine is there.

Towering. Looming. Caging me in.

His shadow devours me as one large, veined hand wraps around my throat, pressing me back to the couch—not choking or hurting, just holding me in place and reminding me how fucking *powerless* I am right now.

My breath turns quick and shallow, my pulse thrumming frantically against his palm.

He leans in, his ice-blue gaze burning into mine, lips slightly parted, like he’s debating whether to speak or *bite*.

“You just made the biggest mistake of your life,” he growls.

A shiver rips down my spine.

I should be afraid. And I am. But the fear is twisting into something else that I don't want to name.

Just like last time.

His grip tightens slightly, as if he can feel it too.

I force my voice to work. "You have two options," I whisper. "Either you pick—"

"Do you even *know* what you saw the other night?" he murmurs darkly.

I swallow with difficulty against the hand around my throat. "*Yes*."

His lips curl. "No, you don't," he says. "You just fucking *think* you do. If you really did, you'd be running as fast as and as far away from me and this city as you could, and you'd bury yourself in a dark hole, and never, *ever* come out."

Sirens blare in my head as his hand closes tighter around my throat. As his eyes pierce mine and he leans down close.

"If you had even an inkling of what you saw the other night, little dancer," he snarls, "coming here and throwing it *in my fucking face* is the single last thing you'd ever dream of doing."

The room is pin-drop silent when he's finished.

Slowly, his powerful grip unwinds from my throat. His hand drops, leaving behind a throbbing, tingling sensation that makes me flinch in spite of myself as he stares down at me.

"You should have stayed Miss Nobody who heard and saw nothing, little dancer," he growls. "Because the one fucking thing you don't want to be with me is someone who saw far, *far* too much."

He steps away, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Now run away, and pray to whatever god you believe in that I don't feel like chasing you this time."

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9

LYRA

THE THEATER IS EMPTY.

Dark.

Silent and familiar, which is what I need right now.

The only sound is my own gasping breath as I collapse onto the stage, body slick with sweat, limbs shaking from exhaustion.

I had no reason to be here tonight. There was no rehearsal. No company meeting. But I needed to move.

Madame Kuzmina trusts her dancers enough that most of us know the access code for the side door to the theater, so we can come and do exactly this if we want. I'm not quite sure our sadist of a director had "therapy" in mind with that decision. But tomayto, tomahto.

Tonight, I needed my muscles to ache and my lungs to burn. I needed to feel grounded. Because all day, I've been running from my own thoughts.

From the interview. From Carmine. From the notion that I was *insane* enough to try and blackmail a man like him.

I feel like that needs to be stressed more than once: I—little old me—tried to blackmail the new don of one of the most powerful Italian mafia families in the country.

I mean what the fuckity-*fuck*, self?

I haven’t spoken to Milena or Bianca since I ran out of the Barone mansion without stopping or looking back. Didn’t say goodbye. Didn’t try to cover my exit with a joke. I’ve been ignoring their texts, too.

Because what the *hell* do I even say? Especially to Bianca?

And also? I don’t know what’s worse: what I did already, or waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“You should have stayed Miss Nobody who heard and saw nothing, little dancer. Because the one fucking thing you don’t want to be with me is someone who saw far, far *too much. Now run away, and pray to whatever god you believe in that I don’t feel like chasing you this time.”*

Even replaying the words is enough to send a violent shiver up my spine. I flinch, glancing over my shoulder. I’ve been doing that since I ran yesterday.

But so far, there’ve been no men dragging me into an alley.

No retaliation.

Nothing.

…Not *yet.*

I exhale slowly, pressing my palms against the stage and lowering my forehead to the floor in a deep, satisfying stretch.

The theater is dark except for the faint blue footlights and a single work light illuminating the floor immediately around me.

It’s comforting, in a way. Like I can pause time and everything else *out there* and just exist in my own little bubble here in a comfortingly familiar world—feet encased in slippers, sweat on my skin, and a sprung dance floor grounding me, like it’s done my whole life.

Except right then is when the air changes. Grows colder. Turns *black.*

I freeze as a prickle of awareness crawls down my spine.

I’m being watched…

My pulse ramps into high gear as I cautiously lift my head, my breath stuttering. Beyond the light, in the deep black of the empty house, something moves.

Some*one*.

A figure, stepping out of the shadows. Tall. Broad-shouldered. Wearing darkness like a second skin.

Oh, God.

It feels like a blade teasing over my every vertebra as Carmine materializes out of the gloom. His suit is black, his shirt unbuttoned at the collar, his sleeves rolled up like he came straight from committing violence.

He moves like he owns the world, owns this theater, owns me as he oozes down the middle aisle and comes to a stop in front of the stage.

And somehow, even though *I'm* looking down at *him* from an elevated position, it's still painfully obvious that the power lies entirely with him.

His gaze pins me in place, his blue eyes burning, staring me down like a predator sizing up his prey.

My throat works as I slowly climb to my feet, my arms wrapped around myself.

"How… How did you find me?" I ask quietly.

Carmine doesn't blink.

"You're hardly in witness protection, little dancer," he murmurs. His brow furrows. "What was that?"

"What was what?"

"The dance you were just doing."

I wet my lips. "It's part of the *pas de trois*. From *Swan*—"

"*Lake*, I know," he finishes. "My sister dances."

His jaw ticks.

“Do it again,” he says.

My stomach tightens. “Excuse me?”

Carmine tilts his head slightly, his expression sharp but otherwise unreadable. “Again. Dance for me.”

The words are rough—an order, not a request.

I should tell him to fuck off. Should walk away. *Run* away.

But there’s a darkness in the way he’s watching me that terrifies and captivates me equally.

His voice drops even lower, to a lethal rasp. “I said, *dance for me*.”

Fuck.

This is a bad idea. Dancing has always been mine. The only thing no one could touch, not even Arkadi. And now Carmine is standing here, demanding it from me like I owe it to him.

Maybe I do.

Maybe this is the way we settle whatever score I fucked with by even showing up the other day, let alone threatening him.

If so, yeah, I can dance for this controlling psycho.

The music is only in my head, but that's okay.

I close my eyes.

And I dance.

I move like I’m letting every thought I don’t want to have bleed out. Every memory, every fear, every lingering touch from the other night—from *him*—that shouldn’t have felt so good, but did.

I don’t dare open my eyes, but I can feel the weight of his gaze dragging over my skin.

It shouldn’t make me feel the way it does.

When I finally stop, I'm panting, my chest rising and falling, and I shudder when I realize Carmine is no longer standing in the audience, looking up at me. Somehow, while I was dancing, he made his way up onto the stage, and now he steps a bit closer, melting out of the shadows and coming into the light.

Slowly. Deliberately.

He keeps moving—more like *prowling*—toward me. I want to say it's because I'm exhausted from running through the piece again, but no. It's the piercing, unhinged, almost inhuman glint in his eyes that pins me in place, forcing me to stand there until he's looming over me again, the citrusy scent of him swirling through my senses.

His hand slips into his pocket. For a brief second, part of me wonders if he's about to pull out a gun and tie off this loose end right here and now.

But Carmine doesn't pull out a gun. Nor does he murder me on stage like something out of an angsty Baz Luhrmann movie.

He just extends his hand, palm down, like he's holding something.

"Your hand," he growls.

Slowly, shivering, I raise mine. And suddenly, he's dropping something into my open palm.

My breath hitches as I stare at Aunt Alison's necklace, my brain trying to make sense of how it's here in my hand again.

…That's when I realize it's wet. And sticky.

And *red*.

My heart leaps into my throat as I stare at the blood staining my palm and the delicate necklace chain. I almost drop the fucking thing, then Carmine closes my hand around it with his.

My pulse skips violently.

He smiles. But it's not friendly. Not one bit.

“Your debt to Grigori Popov has been settled,” he growls. “Bought out, if you will.”

I stare at my closed fist, my fingers trembling.

“But I didn’t buy off your debt, little dancer,” Carmine continues, his voice silk and steel.

I look up. He smiles coldly.

“I bought *you*.”

I suck in a sharp breath.

He lifts a hand, brushes my cheek. “You’re going to marry me, Lyra,” he murmurs. “You belong to *me* now.”

The whole world glitches around me. Reality doesn’t quite make sense for a second. As if I’m watching a movie and the stream buffers.

I can’t move.

I can’t breathe.

Literally.

And I realize, slower than I should, that both of those things are directly related to the fact that he’s just wrapped a powerful, veined hand around my throat, his fingers sinking into my flesh.

Choking me.

Ensnaring me.

My eyes widen as my hands fly to his arm, clawing, hitting, smacking at him. But there’s no fighting him. No overpowering him. And it hits me that if he wanted to kill me right the fuck now?

He could.

My mind blanks as his fingers tighten, pressing into the soft, vulnerable skin of my throat.

“What makes a psychopath truly dangerous isn’t just their capacity for violence…

They learn your vulnerabilities without you realizing it and may use those vulnerabilities to their advantage.”

My fingers claw and smack, fighting against the iron grip around my neck.

His eyes burn into mine, his expression calm, like he’s already decided how this ends.

I never had a choice at all.

Then his lips curl into a smirk, and he leans in, his tone low and final.

“This isn’t a game you get to quit, Lyra. You made your move. Now you have to deal with me.”

And then—he lets go.

I collapse onto the stage, gasping for air and choking roughly.

By the time I blink away the haze and look up, he’s already vanished into the shadows.

And I’m left there, clutching my bloodied necklace.

Firmly caught in his snare.

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10

CARMINE

POP LOOKS GOOD.

Too good for a man who just had a fucking heart attack.

He's kicked back in one of the heavy leather chairs in the study, legs stretched out, glass of whiskey in hand—because *of course* he does.

The flickering fire highlights the deep lines on his face, but his eyes are still sharp and bright, full of that devil-may-care energy that's kept him alive for decades.

Not even his own body betraying him has slowed him down.

"Jesus, Pop," I mutter, shaking my head. "You're really sitting there like nothing happened?"

Vito half shrugs. "Something *did* happen, and then it *stopped* happening. So now I'm going to enjoy my fucking whiskey, thank you very much."

I exhale a long sigh as Sinatra croons in the background.

"You *had a heart attack*—"

"Which I *survived*," he interrupts, grinning.

I scowl. "You're not immortal, old man."

"Could've fooled me," he smirks, lifting his glass in a mock toast before taking a sip.

I exhale slowly.

Vito has always been like this—loud, cocky, refusing to let anything get to him. Tonight, I can't decide if it's comforting, charming, or fucking infuriating.

"You shouldn't be drinking," I mutter.

"And *you* shouldn't be such a pain in my ass," he fires back, peering at me over the rim of his glass. "You know, son, I *did* just have a heart attack."

I roll my eyes.

Dad smacks his lips, savoring the whiskey extra hard to piss me off.

I exhale slowly, rolling my neck. Vito watches me for a long moment, then his expression softens a little.

"Let me tell you something, kid," he says, shifting slightly in his chair. "I've spent my whole life watching people get eaten alive in this world. But me?" He smirks, tapping his chest. "I made this world mine. It's gonna take more than a little myocardial whatever-it-is to knock me down."

He leans back, watching me carefully.

"You think this rattled me," he mutters. "It didn't. Not really."

"No?" I challenge, crossing my arms.

He takes another sip before setting his glass aside. "No. You know what I *was* thinking about when I was in that hospital?"

I arch a brow.

"The girls at Lickety Splits," he says dreamily.

I bark out a laugh. "Jesus Christ. Near-death experience, and you're thinking about titties?"

"Kid, if *titties* can't pull you out of it when you're staring down death, you're fucked. Remember that," he grins, lifting his glass again in salute.

I chuckle and shake my head, bringing mine to my lips.

Vito grins, stretching his arms behind his head. “Seriously, though. I was thinking about the club.”

Lickety Splits was a strip club Pop managed when we were all kids, when our great-uncle Vincenzo was still alive and don of the Barone family. Even as he grew into bigger things, Dad kept that office above the club.

Hell, he’s *still* got it.

The first two floors aren’t mirrored VIP champagne rooms and stripper poles anymore. There’s a Michelin two-star French restaurant on the first floor, and a tech startup above it. But Vito’s office on the third floor still looks *exactly* the same.

I spent *way* too much of my childhood running around backstage, listening to the dancers gossip while they did their makeup. But what I remember most isn’t the excitement of maybe getting a peek of something I wasn’t supposed to. It was how protective of them Pop always was.

“You remember what I used to tell you and your brothers?” he asks, watching me carefully.

I nod, smirking, wanting to get it just right.

“*Just because a woman takes her clothes off for money doesn’t mean she deserves any less respect than the asshole handing her the cash.*”

Vito points at me, nodding. “Damn right. Those girls worked harder than half the men in this city. They sure as hell didn’t need some punk thinking they could be bought.”

His eyes sharpen slightly. “Anyway, that’s what I was thinking about. That, and you.”

I smile, watching him carefully.

“What about me?”

Vito sighs, rolling his shoulders. “You’re stepping into something big, Carmy.”

I exhale slowly. “Well, luckily it isn’t permanent.”

The study goes quiet. When the silence really hits me, I drag my gaze back to Pop, who fixes me with a heavy look.

“Yeah, it is,” he says quietly. He holds my gaze. “I’m done, kid. And I’m *happy* to be done. This game has gotten too complex for a simple guy like me.”

Holy shit.

The man who built this empire, who fought for it, bled for it, held onto it with an iron grip, is letting go.

“I’m looking forward to retirement,” he mutters, rubbing his jaw. “That’s mostly because I trust you to lead.”

I drag a hand through my hair, exhaling. “And if you’re wrong on that trust?”

Vito snorts. “Jeez, you always this whiny?”

“You always this full of shit?”

He grins, shaking his head. “You’ll be fine, Carmine. Hell, you’re my son, of course you’ll be fine.”

I don’t know about that.

“So.” He folds his hands over his stomach. “We gonna talk about it?”

“About what—you quitting on me?”

He chuckles. “*No*, knucklehead. Lyra Ostrova.”

I exhale slowly, stretching my legs out. “You gonna ask me why I picked her over everyone else?”

“Nope.”

I frown. “What?”

He shrugs. “I won’t presume to understand you. And I definitely won’t presume to second-guess your decisions, especially when it comes to

women.” He lifts a hand, gesturing vaguely. “They’re your decisions. Good *or* bad. So—learn to live with them.”

I smirk. “That supposed to be wisdom?”

He chuckles. “I’ll let you in on a little secret. When you get older, you can just mouth off any shit, and because your hair is gray and you’ve got lines on your face, everyone takes it as wisdom.”

I scowl. “That’s…not exactly comforting.”

Pop grins. “Okay, then. Why *did* you pick her?”

I sigh, my brows furrowing deeply. “She forced my hand.”

Pop hoots another laugh, shaking his head before pouring himself another drink, ignoring my glare. “Welcome to married life, kid. “Dare I ask what she did to force it?”

“It’d be best if you didn’t.”

He snickers. “So, the girl has your balls in a vice already. I think I like her.”

“Trust me, when you meet her, you’ll see what I mean.”

He sighs. “What’s so wrong with her?”

I let out a breath, letting my head flop back against the couch. “Fucking *everything.*”

Vito laughs, loud and unfiltered. “And yet, you picked her.”

“I told you, she *forced* my hand.”

He shakes his head. “You’re about to be the don of an empire, kid,” he grunts. “Not to sound like a heartless ass, but if you *truly* didn’t want anything to do with her, I’m *sure*….” He shrugs. “*Arrangements* could have been made resulting in her *not* having this leverage over you, whatever it is.”

He’s not wrong. And it’s not as though I haven’t thought about it several times since that night.

Lyra saw more than she should have. What *should* have happened next was either scaring the shit out of her and making damn sure she never spoke about it, or else *truly* making sure she never spoke about it.

In an *extremely permanent* way.

Obviously, I didn't do that. And it's not because I've got some sort of warm fuzzy heart beating inside my chest that "just couldn't take" the thought of killing her.

An overabundance of *conscience* has never been my issue.

Trying to find any semblance of it has usually been more the issue. Or trying to fake it for the sake of those around me.

But I digress. It's not that I didn't kill Lyra because I couldn't bring myself to.

It's because I didn't *want to*.

And therein lies the problem, and the confusing part in all of this.

Why *didn't* I want to? Making her disappear would have been the simplest, cleanest solution to my problem by *far*. Her having seen inside the Court isn't good, obviously, but it's not like she saw the inner sanctum, or our faces. And we do, after all, proactively invite guests to dine, drink, and fuck during our very deliberately Roman-orgy-esque sessions.

But she went further than that.

She placed me as The Hound.

And it actually gets worse, and that's the very reason I picked her for this charade.

She caught the attention of my darkness.

Irrevocably. Irrationally.

And now, may God have mercy on her soul. Because if she thinks *I'm* intense, she has no idea what's in store for her with him.

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11

LYRA

THE BARONE ESTATE is even more ridiculous than I remember.

It was excessive enough when I first stepped into it at the audition. But now, with the entire house lit by chandeliers and filled with the buzz of *very* powerful people, it feels…otherworldly.

Like I've somehow stepped into a different reality.

Cosplaying someone else's life.

The limo pulls up to the grand entrance across from Central Park. Even before the car fully stops, I can already see the other arrivals: men in custom tailored suits, women wrapped in designer gowns that probably cost more than a year's rent for me.

A flask clinks softly beside me.

I close my eyes for a second, inhaling. "Mom…"

"*Relax,*" Vera drawls, tucking the flask back into her clutch. "I'm not drunk."

That's…clearly false. But I don't have the bandwidth to deal with my mother or her bullshit tonight. She's only here at all because earlier, when Carmine called to tell me—not ask—about the limo, he also told me Vera would be coming, too.

Again, *told*, not asked.

“I don’t think bringing her is a good idea,” I’d said carefully.

“I didn't ask for your opinion,” he'd replied.

So, you know, married life with that psycho is going to be just *super*.

But for the millionth time, I remind myself of the reasons I’m doing this. Well, the biggest reason I’m *still* doing this, namely, that “no” doesn’t appear to be in Carmine’s lexicon, and that *he doesn’t seem interested in the slightest* in calling it off.

Every second that passes since I had the brilliant idea to threaten Carmine only makes me wonder what the actual fuck I was thinking there.

He’s a mad dog. And mad dogs only do one thing when you back them into a corner.

They bite.

I glance down, chewing on my lip and fussing with the gown I borrowed from Milena. It’s not like my closet is flush with options for a swanky, black-tie mafia event.

Otherwise known as my engagement party.

“You look fine,” Vera sighs, like it’s an inconvenience to compliment me. “A little plain. But fine.”

My eyes swivel to her as we wait for the driver to walk around to open the door for us outside the Barone mansion. “Gee, thanks.”

She smirks. “Don’t be so *sensitive*, Lyra. I mean, if it was me, I’d have gone for something sexier. He’s a man, after all, not a priest.”

“He’s already marrying me, Mother,” I mutter, pulling at the plunging cleavage of Milena’s muted champagne-colored silk gown.

The driver opens the door and extends a hand to help me out. I swallow heavily as I pause on the sidewalk, glancing up at the mansion that looks ready to swallow me whole.

I’m shaken out of my reverie as Vera steps out of the limo next to me

“Fuck me sideways, these people are *loaded*,” she mutters, staring up at the house. An eager grin spreads across her smudged dark lipstick as she turns to me. “You did good, sweetie. You’re marrying us into some *serious* dough.”

Vera Barnova, everyone. Dripping with class, obviously.

That’s all she cares about. Not that I’m about to legally bind myself to a very dangerous man. Or that my life is about to change forever.

Just the money.

There’s a chance my mother doesn’t actually *know* about the million dollars involved in this sordid affair. And by “a” chance I mean a "one hundred percent" chance.

I never told her.

I’m not blind. I know I care too much about a woman who doesn’t really return the sentiment. I also know there’s a chance that the second Vera got her hands on any real money, she’d either disappear, drink herself to death, gamble it all away—or, in all likelihood, all three.

The other reason I haven’t brought it up, though, is that I don’t actually know where I stand with the money.

Carmine didn’t mention it the other night at the theater, and it’s not like we’ve talked much since.

I was going to use it to pay back Popov, but apparently, that debt has now been settled—somehow.

Judging by the blood on my necklace when Carmine handed it back to me, I can make an educated guess how that shook out.

So where does that leave me now? That million-dollar carrot was the only reason I agreed to this insanity in the first place. Now that Carmine has decided he owns me, that I’m going to be his wife whether I like it or not…

Does that deal still stand?

We make our way up the stairs, past the guards, through the grand double doors—

And I’m suddenly drowning in a world I do *not* belong in.

I wasn’t paying much attention to the house when I was here a few days ago. I was too numb and nervous about the insanity I was about to pull. But now that I’m back, I can legit feel my jaw dropping as my eyes drink in the splendor of the mansion.

It's *stunning*.

Vaulted ceilings with hand-painted frescoes, crystal chandeliers, gilded mirrors reflecting the golden light, making the space feel endless.

The hum of conversation and classical music surrounds us, while discreet waitstaff quietly weave through the crowd with trays of canapés and flutes of champagne.

This is power.

I feel its weight pressing in on me, wrapping around my throat like invisible hands. I don’t know where to stand, where to look. I'm sure everyone can tell I don’t belong here.

Vera, of course, wastes no time getting comfortable.

As soon as we step deeper into the party, she plucks a flute of champagne from a passing waiter’s tray with the ease of someone who’s spent her whole life coasting on other people’s wealth.

She takes a slow, meditative sip, her heavily painted lips curling around the rim of the glass as she sweeps her gaze over the room like she belongs here.

Like she was always meant for a place like this.

Her eyes flick to me, and she smirks. “You look like you’re waiting for security to throw you out.”

Before I can reply, a hand slides around my waist, pulling me against a firm, hard body.

“She’s just taking it all in.”

My gaze snaps to Carmine’s crystal blue eyes, carving right into mine.

A cold shiver ripples down my spine.

Some men are dangerous and look it. Carmine is the sort of man who *doesn’t*, and that makes him even more deadly.

My father was the same. Everyone always said how handsome he was—classically good looking, charming, easily approachable. That’s exactly what made him such a villain. It’s how he was able to reel those girls in and trap them.

Destroy them.

Now, I’m looking up at the same sort of monster.

Objectively, Carmine is *gorgeous*. Sharp jaw, high cheekbones, piercing blue eyes that shine just a little too brightly.

It’s not just his looks, though.

It’s the way he wears them.

The easy smile, the effortless charm—the smooth, rich voice that settles into your bones before you even realize you’re listening. He’s built to disarm, to break down walls before you even know you’ve let him in.

That’s what makes him so fucking lethal.

The rest of them see a mafia prince. The Barone heir. A man to be feared, respected, obeyed.

They don’t see the venom flowing in his veins, the monster hiding behind those sharp smiles and custom suits.

But I have.

“Isn’t that right, *fiancée*,” he murmurs, his voice silkily dangerous. Before I can respond, his gaze slides back to my mother.

Instantly, I feel ice slip down my spine when his eyes grow a little colder.

“Mrs. Ostrova, that party silverware is yours to keep. But if I see you putting anything else from my home into your purse, it’s not *security* I’ll be calling.”

Holy. *Shit*.

I slowly turn, my mouth open as I see shock and indignation spread over Vera’s face.

“I *beg* your pard—”

“*Lovely* to meet you, Mrs. Ostrova. Enjoy the evening.”

Without another word, Carmine’s hand tightens on my hip, marching us away through the crowd. It’s not until we get to the bar that I somehow remember how to move and attempt to pull back from him.

Carmine’s hand doesn’t budge. Not a single part of him does, like he’s suddenly turned to marble, keeping me pinned to his side for all of eternity.

“Can you please *let go*,” I mutter under my breath as he orders two flutes of champagne from the bartender.

“No.”

No explanation. Just a flat *no*.

I struggle for another few seconds as he casually sips his champagne and drags his gaze around the room, completely indifferent to my efforts. Finally, I give up.

“What was that?”

“What was what?”

“Back there, with my mom.” My brow furrows. “I mean, ever heard of first impressions?”

“I have. I find them overrated. Also, caring about first impressions suggests you care *at all* about the person you’re having that first impression with.”

I frown. “Not really. It means you care about *their* impression of you…”

I trail off when I realize where this is going.

“Are you suggesting I should give a fuck what your embarrassment of a mother thinks of me?”

My brows shoot up as my jaw drops. “Really?”

“What—is she standing right here?”

I stare at him.

“No,” he continues, looking at me plainly. “So why are you still continuing with this charade, pretending she’s anything but a hindrance to you?”

Jesus, seriously?

“You realize this is a *person* we’re talking about, right? Look, she’s…a lot. But she’s also my *mom*.”

He shrugs easily. “It's rarely that complicated. Life becomes much simpler when you stop trying to tell yourself people are anything more than what they show you.”

My brow furrows. “Are you always this robotic when it comes to people?”

Carmine sips his champagne, his eyes locked on mine over the rim of his flute. “Only when they’re not worth being anything but robotic with.”

“*Not worth it* because of who they are? Or because they can’t do anything for you, or have anything you need?”

His brows arch. “I’m not sure this is an either-or type of conversation where that woman is concerned.”

I smile wryly, looking down at my flute.

“She’s…”

I take a slow breath before I shrug and glance back up at him.

“At the end of the day, she’s my mother.”

“In which case, you have my congratulations for having achieved what you have in spite of that.”

A curious smile twists my lips.

* * *

EVENTUALLY, Carmine actually does remove his hand from my hip, when he's pulled away by Cesare Marchetti, head of the Marchetti family, and the young, more than slightly lethal-looking Nero De Luca, the young and relatively new head of the De Luca organization. Both these men sit with Vito Barone—well, Carmine now, I suppose—on The Commission; a sort of high council of the five most powerful Italian mafia families in the country.

Yeah, I'm not just marrying into *a* mafia family.

I'm marrying into one of *the* mafia families.

I linger awkwardly by the bar, forcing fake smiles to my face whenever various party guests come to fawn over me, or perhaps ogle me like I'm some circus freak that doesn't belong here.

"She's Arkadi Ostrov's daughter, you know."

"Those poor girls in the basement…"

"You remember the stories in the news, don't you?"

By the time I've heard the thirtieth variation of *who I am* whispered with furtive glances behind secretive hands, I'm ready to ditch this whole thing and make a break for it, consequences be damned.

Just as I'm scanning for the nearest exit, I lock eyes with Bianca. She's standing next to her giant of a husband, Kratos Drakos, who's wearing a tuxedo that looks like it was tailored for a mythological demi-god.

We haven't spoken since the audition.

She hasn't answered my calls or returned my texts. She may as well have erected steel walls between us at work.

I hate it.

I hate what she might think of me now. I hate that she must assume that I decided to cash in our friendship for a shot at her brother's money, like some gold-digging opportunist.

For a second, as our gazes clash, it looks like she's going to walk away. But then Kratos leans down, putting his large hand on the small of her back and murmuring in her ear. He nods his chin in my direction before he kisses the top of her head and moves off into the crowd.

Bianca looks back at me, takes a deep breath, and then starts to walk over.

My stomach tightens as she comes to a stop in front of me, a caged expression on her face.

I force a small smile. "Bianca—"

"You didn't tell me," she interrupts, her voice cold. "I just thought…I mean, we're friends… You sort of blindsided me with this."

My throat goes tight.

"I—" I shake my head, words failing. "I didn't think I'd go through with it."

Her brow furrows.

I exhale sharply, barreling forward.

"I needed the money," I admit, my voice low. "It was urgent, and I felt desperate."

She frowns in concern, sucking her lower lip between her teeth and stepping closer to me.

"Lyra, you could've just…"

Her mouth twists before she can finish that sentence.

She knows me well enough to know that *no,* I couldn't "just ask" to borrow the money from her. I'm not wired that way.

"Look, after that whole audition thing, I swear, I wasn't going to go through with it," I blurt. "I was sure I was done, but then—"

My mouth clamps shut.

Then he told me in no uncertain terms that I was HIS.

Bianca shakes her head. “I’m just worried about why he picked *you*.” Her eyes snap quickly to mine. “That came out wrong. I mean, he…” Her throat bobs. “Look, Lyra, I love my brother. It’s just that Carmine…” she swallows again. “He’s…more than people think.”

A cold feeling drags its claws down my spine.

“Please, *please*, don’t take this the wrong way,” she says quietly. “But with his pick of half the mafia princesses in the city, all from hugely important, powerful families… I’m worried why he would choose *you*.”

Well, Bianca, that would be because I threatened him with my knowledge of whatever deranged game he and a few other masked psychos play in an underground cathedral with a maze.

She takes a slow breath, her eyes lifting to mine. “Look, you’re the human psychology student. Carmine is…different. Not always, and he’s very good at hiding it away. But… It’s there. And as much as I love him? He scares me sometimes.”

Her throat works again as she takes one of my hands in hers.

“Lyra,” she says quietly. “I’m not mad at you for marrying my brother. I’m terrified *for* you.”

* * *

BIANCA’S WORDS have my stomach in knots as I scan the party.

I finally spot him, weaving away from the crowd, his presence rippling through the sea of guests.

Now’s my chance.

I slip through the gathering, quickly but carefully following him out of the ballroom, down one of the grand hallways lined with gilded mirrors and

framed classical art.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way. But I’m worried why he would choose you.”

“I’m not mad at you for marrying my brother. I’m terrified for *you.”*

I should leave it alone, but I can’t.

I need to know about the money.

The million dollars means this is a transaction. Compensation for goods and services rendered. It means we have an arrangement.

If there *is* no money, then I’m just *his*.

And that scares the fuck out of me.

I spot him just ahead, slipping down another hallway. I quicken my pace, my heels clicking on the polished marble as I round a corner—

I barely have time to gasp as a hand clamps around my wrist, yanking me into the dark. Then a door slams shut, the lock clicking menacingly into place.

Candles flicker on the marble sink, casting golden light across the dark tiles of a massive guest bathroom. Carmine’s lethally hard body is pure heat and dominance, his strong hands on my hips, caging me against the wall.

The panic that spikes in my chest as my breath shudders out of me is tangled with something else I don’t want to name.

His hands move, trailing up my sides, over my ribs, along the silk of my dress. Reminding me that I’m exactly where he wants me.

Taking his time, savoring the control.

I shiver as his fingers skim just beneath my breasts, barely grazing the delicate fabric, setting every nerve ending in my body ablaze.

My pulse pounds violently.

“Carmine—”

“What are you doing, little dancer?” His voice is low, edged with amusement, but with darkness curling beneath it.

I shudder. “I—I need to talk to you.”

“About?”

His hands don’t stop moving. One slides higher, fingers brushing the thin straps of my gown, teasing the bare skin of my collarbone. It’s unfair how he’s scarcely touching me, barely pressing, yet every single nerve in my body reacts.

I force myself to focus and clear my throat, trying to keep my voice steady.

“About the money.”

Carmine’s eyes flicker. His lips curve into a dark grin.

“What money?”

“The—”

I flinch, gasping sharply as he slips his fingers under the strap of my gown and peels it down off my shoulder. My body shudders as he moves to the other strap, and I try to stop him.

Laughable.

With zero effort at all, in a millisecond, he’s pinned my hands behind my back, held in his iron grip. His body presses me harder to the wall, imprisoning me between him and it.

When he reaches for the other strap, I still squirm and fight. But there’s no space to resist. My heart rate spikes as he slips his fingers under the other strap, peeling it down my shoulder until the entire top of my gown hangs dangerously on the small slopes of my breasts, nothing but my pebbled nipples keeping it from baring everything.

“You were saying?” he purrs darkly.

I shiver, my throat bobbing.

“The…the million dollars.”

He chuckles, like the question amuses him.

“Ah,” he murmurs. “*That* money.”

I stare at him. Waiting.

He leans in, voice dropping just enough to make my skin prickle.

“Popov was going to kill you,” he murmurs. “Or worse. And, spoiler, *that was going to happen whether you got him the money or not*.”

I swallow hard.

“But now,” Carmine continues, “that isn’t going to happen.”

I stiffen as his fingers idly trace a slow path across my collarbone before starting to trickle down the skin between my breasts. A heated throb pulses in my core as his fingertip hooks into the fabric of my gown.

“Okay, but what does that mean—”

He tugs with his finger, swiftly pulling the top of my gown off my chest. I gasp sharply as the cool air hits my bare breasts, teasing against my nipples. My arms strain as I try and pull my hands free to cover myself.

That isn’t happening.

All I can do is struggle helplessly as his cold blue eyes drop to my nudity.

I’m no prude. And I’m not bothered by nakedness. I mean, I’ve spent most of my life changing in crowded dressing rooms, theater wings, backstage, and much less private places surrounded by dancers, directors, stagehands, and who even knows else.

But there’s something so…*eviscerating* about the way he's looking at me. Like he’s flaying open my skin and revealing every single hidden thought and insecurity I’ve ever had, all at once.

I try again to pull my wrists free of his grip. I might as well try to move a mountain.

“What that means, little dancer,” he growls quietly. “Is—”

“Let me go—*ahh!*”

My eyes bulge when in one casual motion he reaches up with his free hand and roughly pinches my left nipple, twisting it sharply in his fingertips. Something raw and primal erupts inside of me, the pinching pain of his merciless touch swirling with the dangerously, illicitly exciting.

“*Do not* interrupt me,” he murmurs.

His fingers are still tight around my nipple, sending bolt after bolt of throbbing heat teasing through my nerves. He rolls the aching bud between his fingers, wrenching a whimper from my lips.

The second it falls from my mouth, I want to melt into a puddle and disappear through a crack in the floor.

Carmine’s eyes spark with something malicious and hungry as he latches onto the sound, like a vampire.

He smiles.

Darkly. Knowingly.

I squirm as he reaches for my other breast, his fingers tightening slightly, rolling that nipple before releasing it—but the damage is already done.

My entire body is buzzing traitorously, still aching where he touched me.

Then, his voice cuts through the haze.

“You have this bad habit of thinking you get to set the terms, little dancer,” he murmurs, his tone smooth, mocking.

He leans in, his lips merely a breath away from my ear.

“Popov thought the same thing.”

He waits, letting the words settle, allowing me to connect the dots.

I shudder.

“Did you—” My voice falters. I clear my throat, forcing the words out. “Did you kill him?”

Carmine’s smirk deepens.

There’s no guilt in his expression. No hesitation.

His hand slips from my breasts and slowly moves to my ribs, letting his fingertips press into each little ridge and indentation as he skims lower to my hip, making my breath catch.

“My secret weapon,” he murmurs, “is that it’s not hard for me to do what I need to do. To get what I want. To protect my interests, and what’s *mine*.”

A heated shiver ripples through my core as his hand tightens on my wrists behind my back. The other one pushes lower over my hip, teasing further and further before suddenly, his fingers are slipping into the high slit of the borrowed gown.

My eyes fly wide as he suddenly pulls the dress open, his hand boldly sliding under the silk and against my inner thigh.

“*Carmine*…”

I throb with embarrassment as his name tumbles needy and desperate from my lips.

His hand moves again, sliding higher until his fingertips brush against the delicate lace of my panties.

I freeze.

His fingers stroke just once, his touch featherlight, his other hand tightening around my wrists and pinning me in place as he teases over my most intimate area like he’s already conquered all of me.

“I simply don’t need to worry about right and wrong. Good or bad.”

A slow shiver ripples through me.

“And to answer your question…” he growls, his lips hovering near my ear, making my knees go weak.

“There is no money.”

I balk.

“But—but there was supposed to be—”

His fingers press. A needy, desperate sound chokes in my throat as the pads of his fingers stroke my pussy lips through the lace. He does it again, a soft touch that has my breath catching and my stomach twisting in ways I don’t want to think about.

“A million,” I breathe.

Carmine smiles viciously.

“You weren’t supposed to be *at* that audition,” he mutters. “And do I really need to mention the part where you threatened me?”

His fingers move again, lazily stroking the lace between us.

I gasp softly, my head turning side to side against the wall.

“*Don’t*,” I whisper.

Carmine’s lips brush my ear.

“Or what?”

“I’ll scream,” I murmur, my thighs shaking as heat pools wet between them.

He smiles.

“Oh, I *know* you will.”

His fingers slip beneath the lace of my panties. I choke on another cry as he touches my bare pussy, dragging a slow, torturous circle over my throbbing clit, bringing a whine to my lips.

“In any case,” he murmurs, voice silky and wicked, “you’re my fiancée. What else *should* I be doing at our engagement party besides taking you away to dark rooms to...*corrupt you*.”

A quiet, tortured sound escapes my throat, hands gripping his arms as I try to ground myself. Then I gasp sharply when Carmine sinks two thick fingers into me.

I moan, my body arching violently against him as I shudder.

“Popov was going to kill you,” Carmine says calmly as he starts to curl his fingers in and out of me.

Lewd wet sounds fill the bathroom as I writhe under his touch, my thighs trembling and my core clenching over and over.

“Now he won’t. Ergo: I saved your life.”

His fingers ram faster, harder, filling the room with the sounds of my needy, traitorous arousal. His muscles coil against me, a tight growl rumbling in his chest as he leans in and bites my neck sharply, making me cry out.

“*Surely* your life is worth at least a million dollars.”

I look away, my pulse hammering.

I’m not so sure about that. But I *am* sure that he’s about to make me explode all over his hand.

The pressure builds. My body writhes and arches against him as his fingers drive into me over and over, getting ready to push me over the edge. Just as I feel myself spiraling into something I can’t come back from—

He stops.

I let out a sharp, frustrated breath, body taut, pulse racing.

Carmine chuckles, dark and smug. I stare in a mixture of shame and confusion as he slips his hand from between my thighs and brings it up between us. Heat floods my cheeks when I see the way his fingers glisten stickily in the flickering candlelight.

His eyes lock with mine as he brings his fingers to his mouth, opens his lips, and slowly, deliberately, licks his fingers clean.

Then he leans in one last time

“You belong to me,” he murmurs. “I’d make peace with that if I were you.”

He licks his fingers once more, bringing a fresh wave of heat to my face. Then he turns, unlocks the bathroom door and steps out, letting it close softly behind him.

…Leaving me shaking, breathless, and completely unraveled.

I linger a few more minutes, clutching the edge of the sink, trying to catch my breath, my eyes refusing to meet their own gaze in the mirror in front of me.

Mercifully, the incoming text notification from my phone in my clutch breaks the tension. Turning, I lean against the sink and pull it out of my bag, glancing down at the screen.

UNKNOWN

Blood doesn't turn on blood, Lyra.

UNKNOWN

You betrayed your family.

It feels like an ice-cold knife plunging into my chest. I stare at the screen as my throat slowly constricts, horror raking its nails down my back.

The entire world goes still, frozen around me. My whole universe is my eyes, reading the screen in my hands with the nightmarish texts.

UNKNOWN

You'll pay dearly for putting me away, moya dorogaya doch'.

If I could scream, I would. But I can't. Instead, terror just claws at my throat, sending poison coursing through my veins as my reality shatters like glass around me.

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12

LYRA

THE CLUB IS PACKED, a flashing neon blur of dancing, writhing bodies. The bass throbs deep in my chest, and there's a charge to the air, like an explosion could happen at any moment.

Which, given the company I'm in, is *entirely* possible.

Milena, Brooklyn, Naomi, Evelina, Bianca, and I are clustered into our own corner near the bar, where my friends are intently trying to convince me to have some fun at my bachelorette party, and—to that end—feeding me drinks.

I didn't ask for the party, and have no idea how to pretend this is a night worth celebrating.

Still, a night out is a night out, and *that* I could certainly use.

Especially after what happened at the engagement party two nights ago, where Carmine managed *once again* to shatter and destroy every single wall I have, like it's his life's mission to set my world on fire and toast marshmallows over the flames.

I tip my glass back, swallowing past the knot in my throat.

The tequila burns on the way down, but it's not enough.

Not enough to erase the feeling of Carmine's hands on me. To undo the memory of his voice in my ear, darkly possessive, telling me I belong to him.

Not enough to wash away the texts.

I force a smile as Evelina nudges me, yelling something over the music. I nod, pretending I heard, pretending I'm here, present, in this moment.

I'm not.

I'm still two nights ago, in a dark, candlelit bathroom, with Carmine pressing me against the wall and breaking me apart and making me drip all over his hand like it was his right.

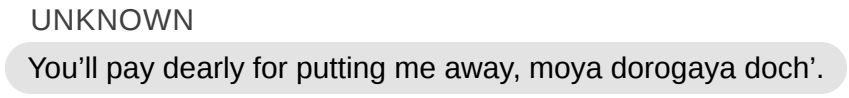
The way he touched me, made me *almost* come, and then licked his fingers after—like he was tasting victory.

And the worst part?

I let him. Because part of me craved it.

Except that *isn't* the worst part. No, the worst part is the texts—the ones that sent a cold rush of terror through my veins, drowning out even Carmine's lingering touch.

It was that last message that's had me barely able to sleep the last two nights.



My darling daughter.

That's what my father used to call me.

My stomach lurches.

I know it's not possible. Ghosts don't exist. Arkadi is dead, stabbed in his own cell in prison four months ago.

I've spent two nights convincing myself that this is just another one of *them*—the conspiracy nuts who rage-listen to podcasts like "The Truth Report". The lunatics who just can't leave me the fuck alone.

My phone number has been leaked online before. Or my email, or even an actual physical address.

Sometimes it’s the people who hate me, the ones so sure that I knew, that I helped, that I should’ve rotted in prison alongside him.

Sometimes it’s worse and it’s the ones who fetishize what Arkadi did. The ones who want to talk to me, touch me, include me in their obsession with him.

But those texts the other night were different.

I press my fingers against my temples, forcing a breath through my nose.

It’s just another crazy.

Another stalker, another freak, another desperate loser with way too much time on their hands.

Deep in my gut, something twists.

“Here.”

My thoughts scatter as a hand delicately takes my empty margarita glass and replaces it with a fresh one. I blink away the remnants of terror, lifting my eyes over the salted rim of my drink to see Milena grinning at me, holding one of her own.

“To…” Her brows knit for a second before she shrugs and clinks her glass to mine. “Marital bliss?”

Naomi snorts loudly before she catches herself. Evelina rolls her eyes, and Brooklyn giggles.

I arch a brow, smirking dryly at my friend. “Did you seriously just say ‘marital bliss’?”

Milena laughs. “Is it too late to take that back?”

“Uh-uh. Taking a toast back is *definitely* bad luck,” Evelina says.

Brooklyn makes a face. “What the hell kind of logic is that? What if it’s a crappy toast?”

Milena clucks her tongue against her teeth. “She’s right. There’s no do-overs with Russians. We just soldier on, through the snow and ice and

hardship.”

Naomi arches a brow, glancing pointedly at Milena’s Louboutins and the Chanel clutch on her lap.

“Tell me more about enduring these hardships, oh strong and resilient Bratva princess.”

The rest of us—even me—crack up when Milena flips her off with a grin.

“You really going to start throwing stones, bitch?” she teases Naomi back. “How *is* Congressman Kim’s glass house?”

Naomi straightens her back indignantly, tossing her dark ponytail back and sipping her cocktail. “Wouldn’t know. I haven’t been to my parents' house in almost a year.”

“*Anyhoo*,” Evelina sighs, cutting in. “What if we just toast to happiness and finding it wherever we can?”

Naomi grins, clinking her glass to everyone else’s. “I can get behind that. Cheers!”

We echo the word, tapping our glasses together and pretending this is actually a celebration.

Brooklyn laughs, leaning in. “Well, if you have to be forced into a mafia marriage, at least you got one of the hot ones.”

I almost choke.

Bianca groans. “Could we *please* stop referring to my brother like that?”

“Well *you* marry him, then,” I mumble.

Brooklyn laughs. “Like, I want your sloppy seconds?”

“*Again*, guys,” Bianca pleads. “Could we *not*?”

“Well, if Lyra’s already bagged Carmine, there’s always Nico.” Naomi grins, her face flushed from the drinks. “I mean, have you *seen* that man? He looks like he'd rail you against a wall and then apologize for messing up your hair.”

Evelina gasps dramatically, clutching her chest. “NAOMI!”

Brooklyn nearly chokes on her drink. “Who the *fuck* are you right now?”

Milena squints at Naomi, tilting her head. “Seriously, who are you and what have you done with sweet, innocent, I-blush-when-someone-says-the-word-dick *Naomi*?”

Naomi blushes fiercely as Bianca slams back the last of her drink.

“All right, I’m out. Please, keep talking about banging my fucking *brother*.”

“Noooo! Bianca!” I laugh, snagging her arm and yanking her down into my lap. “Stay! Please?”

She rolls her eyes, turning to hug me. “I actually *do* have to go. Kratos and I are watching the baby Spartans at Ya-ya’s tonight so Ares and Neve and Hades and Elsa can have a night out together.”

“Um, what do like *half* of those words even mean?” Brooklyn interjects.

Bianca giggles. “Ya-ya is Kratos’ grandmother, Dimitra.”

A smug feeling drifts over me. I mean, I might not be an actual mafia princess, but even *I* know that Dimitra Drakos is the matriarch of the Drakos Greek mafia family. Just like I know Ares, Kratos’ oldest brother, is king of the empire, with Hades, another brother, also helming things.

“And the Spartans?”

“*Baby* Spartans,” Bianca corrects. “Dimitra has this whole fixation on their family being directly descended from the warrior guys with the abs from *300*. So the baby Spartans are Kratos' and my little nephew and niece, Achilles and Bella.”

She turns back to me. “Love ya. Try to have fun tonight.”

I give her a hug. “Thanks for coming out. Really.”

After she leaves, Milena raises her glass. “To our dear friend Lyra, who is about to lose her life—”

“Her *freedom*,” Naomi interjects.

“And most importantly,” Brooklyn adds, “her ability to have anything other than one dick for the rest of her life.”

My face explodes with heat as the rest of them hoot with laughter.

“You guys are such assholes,” I groan.

“Yes, but we’re *your* assholes,” Milena says, bumping my shoulder affectionately.

* * *

THE AIR OUTSIDE is cool and crisp, refreshing after the humid heat of the club. The city is alive, neon signs flickering, streets still packed with late-night crowds drifting between bars and clubs, their laughter and conversation blending with the distant wail of a siren.

The six of us stand near the curb, buzzing from alcohol and adrenaline, debating our next move.

“Food?” Naomi suggests, her eyes slightly glassy from tequila.

“More drinks?” Brooklyn counters, grinning.

“Somewhere *wilder,*” Milena smirks.

“I second that,” Evelina chimes in, tossing her blonde hair over her shoulder. “Let’s go somewhere we won’t get side-eyed for dancing on the tables.”

We laugh, but before we can settle on a place, the energy on the street shifts.

It happens in an instant—a subtle change in the atmosphere, a hush that spreads down the block. People slow. A few heads turn.

Then I see why.

Two black SUVs pull up outside another club just down the street. The doors open, and one by one, they emerge.

Carmine steps out first, clad in dark jeans, black leather jacket, and a plain white t-shirt that fits tight across his powerful chest. Then Nico Barone, smirking, his easy confidence sharp as a blade.

Nero De Luca follows, his bright green eyes gleaming under the dim streetlights as he exudes that same lethality Milena and I caught when he dragged his sister Gabriella from Carmine's auditions the other day.

I recognize Roman Nikitin, obviously, since he's Evelina's brother. But I don't know the three guys who step out of the second car with him. They look Russian as well, though.

"*Shit,*" Evelina groans. "What the hell is Roman doing here?"

Milena frowns. "Looks like Carmine's having a bachelor party of some kind?"

"Well, let's get outta here before—"

"Isn't it past your bedtime, baby sis!?"

Evelina cringes as Roman roars from across the street and halfway down the block, startling easily fifty people on the sidewalk.

He barely even checks for traffic as he jogs across the street, dressed similarly to Carmine in dark jeans and a hoodie with a leather jacket over it.

There's a savage, untamed electricity to him, a restless, dangerous energy that makes you feel he was born to fight, or at least look for trouble wherever he can find it. I've met him a few times, just through being friends with Evie, and he always makes me think of some wild animal that's put on human clothes in an effort to fool everyone around him.

Evelina folds her arms as he stops in front of her, smirking like an older brother who *lives* to be a menace. He looks her over before raising a brow. "That's a *very* short dress, Evie. Does Dad know you went out like this?"

Evelina rolls her eyes so hard she nearly tips over. "Oh my *God*, you are *not* going to pull the protective big brother card."

Roman tips his head. "I mean, I *could* just call Dad and ask him."

Evelina glares. “Go for it. While you’re at it, remind him that the last time you were at the estate, you got so drunk you passed out in the pool.”

Milena sputters. “Wait, what?”

Roman scowls. “That *never* happened.”

Evelina grins wickedly. “You were face-down in the water when we found you, *Rome*. Lucky you didn't freaking drown.”

Brooklyn snorts. “Shit, *that’s* an embarrassing cry for help.”

Roman makes a face as he rolls his neck, tattoo ink peeking out from the neck of his hoodie. “Not as embarrassing as Evie’s curfew,” he fires back. “What is it these days, baby sis? Eleven? Ten-thirty?”

Evelina’s smirk fades. “I do *not* have a curfew, dick.”

Roman laughs, ruffling her hair like she’s five. “Not my fault Dad still treats you like a kid, *solnishka*.”

Evelina shoves his hand away, scowling. “Don’t you have people to kill or something?” she sighs. “Seriously, what are you *doing* here?”

“Could ask you the same thing,” he counters.

Evelina gestures at me with her brows. “Uh, duh?”

“Oh—right.” Roman turns to eye me. “Yeah, so…congratulations, Lyra?”

“Thanks,” I mutter.

Roman turns back to his sister. “Well, if you guys are looking to crank up the volume on your night a little—”

“And we are,” Milena interjects.

Roman grins. “Why don’t you join us, then? We’ve got a VIP booth over there at Doomsday.”

He turns and points a finger to where Carmine and all the others are lounging outside a club across the street. I watch as Nico slips a cigarette

between his lips and lights it, his face illuminating with the glow of it as he shoves his fingers through his dark hair and glances across the street at us.

A shiver ripples down my spine at the way his eyes seem to narrow—analyzing, assessing.

Ripping apart.

And here I thought *Carmine* was the family psycho…

Doomsday actually rings a bell. I've heard it's a hotspot for Bratva types, and nights there have a reputation for going off the rails.

"To *Doomsday*?" Evelina squeaks the word.

Her brother grins darkly at her. "I mean, unless you'd rather go home and have a pajama party. You could watch cartoons, make hot chocolate and popcorn—"

"Fuck you. We're in."

I sigh, slipping my arm through Naomi's as the five of us start following Roman across the street.

"I mean, *I* could go for pajamas and hot chocolate," I giggle.

"*Facts*," Naomi sighs. "But this'll be fun." Eagerness peeks through the cracks in her good girl persona. "I've heard this club gets *insane*."

"It does."

I flinch when his voice ripples over my skin like silk. Even Naomi gasps at the way he just materializes behind us as we reach the other side of the street.

Swallowing, I turn, feeling my bottom lip retreat between my teeth as I look up into Carmine's piercing, vicious eyes.

I gasp as he plucks me away from Naomi and wraps an arm around my waist, so tight I might as well be handcuffed to him.

"…Which is why you'll be staying close to me while we're in there," he growls, dropping his gaze back to mine. "*Very* close."

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13

CARMINE

I'VE ALWAYS KNOWN I was…different.

Most people move through life guided by certain precepts—empathy, fear, guilt.

I'm unencumbered by such things.

I learned young that most people flinch when they see pain. Hesitate before hurting someone. Question their own anger.

I never did.

Not once.

Vito saw it early on, though he never called it what it was.

"Rambunctious," he said when I was a kid, after I broke some other kid's nose for who-even-remembers-what at the playground.

"Hot-blooded, like your grandfather," when at fifteen I sent a rival's son to the ER for looking at me the wrong way.

"Driven for success," when I buried my first body three years later and felt less than nothing.

He never admitted it outright. Even the couple of times he took me wolf hunting up in Alaska, which I know was probably his way of "letting me" get my "urges" out. It's never been anything explicitly said.

He’s never looked me in the eye and said, “My son is a psychopath.”

But he knows.

And I’ve always known, too.

It’s not just that I was born into the mafia world. That’s a lie we tell ourselves—that it makes us more ruthless, that power warps us, that the rules we live by are different because they have to be.

But it’s not just that.

It’s what’s inside you.

And inside *me* is an empty space where there *should* be the switch that stops certain impulses in most people.

Other men—like my father, even like Nico or Dante—calculate the risk. Weigh their morality against their ambition. Debate how far they’re willing to go.

I don’t.

I want something? I take it.

Someone crosses me? I erase them.

The only thing that’s ever mattered is winning.

And I always, *always* win.

But I’ve never wanted anything serious. Not women, not relationships, not any of the shit that makes men go soft.

I’ve *had* women—plenty of them. More than I can count. Some hung around longer than others. Some played the part of the doting girlfriend before they realized I wasn’t built for love, or romance, or happily ever after.

But they were all just temporary distractions.

No one ever really made me feel anything, until *her*.

The little dancer who had the audacity to think she could threaten me and walk away unscathed.

I can’t stop thinking about her, and the darkness inside me has latched onto her in a way I don’t understand.

It’s not just her beauty, or the way my hands seem to have become fixated on touching her and *conquering* her skin one square inch at a time. It’s not just that she’s cunning, or that she got one over on me.

There’s just something nameless about her that calls to the blackness inside me.

Maybe it’s that she ran, made me chase her.

She played a game with me I’ve always craved but never explored—not in the way I explored it with her.

Maybe it’s that she still refuses to break, in spite of the fact that she’s terrified of me and knows she should know better. Still tries to fight. Still pushes back.

Where most people cower in front of me, she defies. Where most people fold when I make it clear they’ve lost, she keeps going.

I've never come across another creature like her.

And that *fascinates* me.

Doomsday has already been alerted that we’ll be coming through, so they're ready for us when we stroll in. The fact that we just strolled in with five extras—i.e., Lyra and her friends—doesn’t faze the staff in the slightest as they escort us through the pulsing club to our booth in the VIP section.

It doesn’t exactly hurt that Laz is a part owner of the place.

Doomsday is used to mafia patrons, especially in the VIP section, though the place is far more known for its Russian clientele than the likes of Nero, Nico, and me. I’m sure the three of us being here with Roman Nikitin, Laz Kislev, Mikhail Javanović and Bane Antonov is raising some eyebrows in certain circles. But they can wonder all they want.

There are some reasons that won’t be spoken about outside of a certain courtroom. But there are others that anyone could see if they bothered to look. Like the fact that a lot of us went to Knightsblood University together—the ultra-exclusive “Ivy League Alternative” outside the city that caters almost exclusively to the heirs of various criminal empires. Or that a lot of us were in the same club at that school together—Para Bellum, to be exact.

At the end of it all, simply *giving a shit* about who you’re seen hanging out with is something the older generations seemed to have worried about far more than us. In Pop's day, he wouldn’t have been caught dead clubbing with members of the Bratva.

But our generation? We don’t give a fuck.

The VIP section is exactly what you’d expect—set on a slightly elevated level, looking down at the rest of the patrons dancing below. The booth is huge and luxurious, with deep, plush seating that curves around a table already laden with top-shelf bottles, buckets of ice, and crystal glasses. The music pulses, low lights casting a sultry glow over the space as the crowd twists and writhes.

Everything about Doomsday screams hedonism, from the go-go dancers in elevated cages grinding to the heavy bass, to the couples tangled together in dark corners, lost in their own pleasure.

I feel Lyra tense beside me.

She doesn’t belong in a place like this.

And she fucking knows it.

Milena, Brooklyn, Evelina, and Naomi don’t hesitate—they slide into the booth, already reaching for bottles, caught up in the moment.

Lyra hesitates.

She moves toward an empty spot beside me, and that’s when I pounce.

Before she can sit, I pull her onto my lap, settling her firmly against my thigh. Her breath catches sharply and her whole body goes stiff. Then she tries to stand, but my grip on her waist tightens.

“No.”

Her head snaps toward me, eyes wide, cheeks flushed pink.

She goes to move again, but my arm snakes around her, my hand gripping her hip firmly as my fingers splay across her stomach—pressing through the material of her dress into her skin, keeping her exactly where I want her.

“Can…” She swallows heavily. “Can you please let me go?”

“No.”

I casually reach over and pour us glasses of champagne from one of the bottles, passing her one before I take a sip from mine.

Studying her. *Analyzing* her.

She’s tense in my lap, her body rigid like she’s fighting herself more than she’s fighting me. I watch as she drags her eyes around the club, looking at the dancers down below, then pulling her attention to the VIP level. I hear her breath catch sharply, and I turn to follow her gaze.

Doomsday has a…*lax* approach to public displays of affection. It all part of the hedonistic vibe, and frankly it’s why people come here. So I’m not surprised when I spot the couple in the corner of another darkened booth not far away.

She’s in his lap, her back to his chest, eyes closed in ecstasy as she grinds on him. The man has his arms wrapped around her, one hand casually cupping her breast through her dress, his fingers rolling and pinching one of her nipples. His other hand is under her short skirt, moving in slow circles as she rolls her hips.

It’s obvious from the looks on both of their faces that his dick is inside her.

Lyra goes still when she realizes what she’s looking at. Her breath hitches violently, and she whips her gaze away, her face stricken, looking a little green around the gills.

Curious.

Her hands drop to my arm, feebly trying to push it off her as she tries to get up. Obviously, I don't move it in the slightest, letting my fingers dig into her a little bit tighter—my way of saying "don't bother".

She tries to shift again. I tighten my hold a little more.

A warning. A claim.

She exhales sharply through her nose, but doesn't move again.

Smart girl.

The rest of the booth is a blur of conversation and laughter—Milena and Brooklyn already knocking back drinks, Evelina rolling her eyes as Roman teases her, Naomi watching the whole scene with bright, eager eyes.

No one is looking at us.

"Does that shock you?"

I nod my chin at the couple still fucking in the corner.

Lyra's face burns, but she doesn't look at where I've just gestured.

"No," she says quickly. Too quickly.

"Are you embarrassed by it?"

She squirms in my lap, her brow furrowing. "No, I just don't…" She shrugs. "I don't need to spy on them."

"Oh, but you're so good at that."

She stiffens, glancing at me out of the corner of her eye.

"That…" Her throat works again, bobbing deliciously. "That wasn't on purpose," she murmurs. "I told you that already."

"Are you bothered by what you saw *that* night?"

I watch her face pale a little, feel the way her body tightens under my grip. She shakes her head side to side a little too vigorously.

"*No*."

Such a liar.

“What you saw that night doesn’t bother you? Or…” She gasps as my fingers tighten a little more on her, my breath hot against her neck. “Or that it was *me* doing those things?”

Lyra pauses a moment, then shakes her head again.

“I—I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Well, *I* do.”

She squirms again, shivering as I lean closer, my lips inches from her earlobe.

“Surely someone like you has *thoughts* about what you saw.”

Her eyes snap to mine furtively, trying to see into the darkness lurking there before she decides that’s a bad idea and averts them again.

“I…”

“Surely a pre-med student with aims of practicing psychiatry has thoughts about what you saw that night.”

She freezes again, her shoulders locking.

I chuckle mockingly. “What’s wrong, little dancer? Thought I didn’t know?”

She forces a neutral expression. “What I’m studying in school is hardly a state secret.”

No—but she didn’t expect me to know.

I tilt my head, watching her squirm. “You’ve been studying people like me, haven’t you?”

She doesn’t answer. Doesn’t need to.

I tap my fingers against her waist, slowly, rhythmically.

“Go on then,” I say smoothly. “Diagnose me.”

She blinks up at me, eyes darting toward the others.

But no one is paying attention.

No one's going to rescue her from this.

"You think I'm a monster."

She swallows, her pulse thumping under my fingers. "I—no."

"Liar."

I smile when she trembles a little.

"If it helps with your diagnosis, that man deserved what he got."

"Says who?"

The second she blurts the words, her lips snap shut again, her eyes widening like she's horrified that they spilled out.

I grin. "Says me. Says the *Black Court*."

Her eyes snap to mine. Her lips part, as if to ask all the questions I'm sure she's had ever since that night. She hesitates a second, but finally she speaks.

"What was that place?" she says quietly. "What *is* the Black Court?"

I smile. "Nothing you need to worry about, little dancer." Her breath hitches as I reach up with my other hand, brushing a lock of gingery red away from her face as my eyes capture hers.

"You haven't done it yet."

Her brow furrows slightly. "Done what?"

"Diagnosed me."

She shifts uncomfortably in my lap again. "I… I don't want to."

"You're not going to offend me, little dancer," I growl. "*Do it*."

I grip her jaw, tilting her face to mine, forcing her to see me.

“Say it,” I murmur.

Her hands press against my chest, not quite pushing, but like she’s fighting the weight of the truth.

“I—”

“*Say it*, Lyra.”

She licks her lips, her voice trembling.

“You… You don’t feel things like other people do.”

I smile. “Such as.”

She starts to look away, but I grab her jaw, forcing her gaze back to me.

“Don’t tap out yet. Keep going. What makes you think that?”

“The other night…” she trails off, and her gaze drops.

“*Go. On…*”

“You just…” She swallows. “You just *killed that man*,” she whispers, a tremor rippling through her body.

“I already told you, he deserved it. Surely you of all people are familiar with the concept of bad people getting their comeuppances.”

Her eyes snap to mine, fire blazing behind them at my obvious low blow. But she reels it back, dropping her gaze again.

“You think I didn’t feel what I should have when I killed him?”

I tilt her chin up, forcing her gaze back to me.

“Did you?” she asks quietly.

“*No*.”

She trembles in my lap.

My dick gets a little harder when she does.

“I’d like that diagnosis now, doctor,” I growl quietly with an icy smile on my face.

“Carmine—”

“I’m waiting…”

She wriggles again. “If I say it, will you let me go?”

“It can’t hurt your chances.”

Her bottom lip slips between her teeth, and she chews on it.

“*Say it*, Lyra.”

She takes a slow, shaky breath, not looking at me.

“You’re… You’re a psychopath.”

The words hang between us. And then—I smile.

I let the moment stretch out, let her feel the weight of what she just admitted.

I lean in, my lips brushing against her ear.

“Good girl,” I murmur, voice silk and steel. “Thank you for your honesty.”

I can feel her pulse thrumming against my fingers, the erratic beat betraying how hard she’s fighting to stay in control. I can also feel her starting to fray at the edges.

I am *not* the kind of man to let an opportunity like that go to waste.

I take a slow sip of my drink, letting my gaze drag lazily back to the couple in the corner.

His hands are on her everywhere—gripping her hips, sliding into her dress to maul her breasts as she bounces on his lap. He’s got a handful of her hair pulled tight as she gasps and shoves back in ecstasy.

It’s raw. Unfiltered.

I glance at Lyra. She’s deliberately not looking.

I smirk, watching her hands clenching and unclenching in her lap.

“Look at them,” I murmur.

Her gaze remains fixed straight ahead, her jaw set, her fingers digging into the silk of her dress.

I tilt my head, studying her. This isn’t just shyness. It runs deeper than that.

I lean in, my voice a rough growl against her ear.

“You’re not a child, Lyra.”

She inhales sharply.

“Why is it,” I murmur, “that you can’t even look at that?”

She doesn’t answer. She doesn’t even *move*.

The only sign that she’s still breathing is the slight, uneven rise and fall of her chest.

Very interesting.

“You study people,” I muse, letting my fingers stroke lazily over her waist. “And here you are, refusing to face something so basic. So naturally, inherently human.”

Her nails press harder into her thighs.

“It’s just *sex*, little dancer.”

I drag a hand up her spine, feeling the way she shudders. I brush my lips against her ear, speaking so quietly only she can hear.

“Look at them,” I say again.

She still doesn’t move.

I let out a slow sigh, then reach up and grip her jaw, turning her face toward the couple in the corner, forcing her to watch.

She gasps sharply, trying to twist away. “Stop it. *Stop it*.”

Her voice is low, panicked.

“Watch them,” I command, voice calm but edged with steel. “Or else tell me why you *can’t.*”

She shakes her head, struggling in my grip.

“Carmine,” she breathes, “*please*.”

Her fingers tighten on my wrist, but she’s not pushing me away anymore. She’s losing this fight, and she knows it. I can feel it in the way her body starts to tremble.

“Please,” she blurts. “Please, I don’t…I…”

Her breath stutters.

Her body sways.

Her hands suddenly lose their grip on my wrist.

Her head lolls slightly, her breath coming in short gasps.

And then, before I even have time to process it, she slumps against my chest.

“Lyra.”

No response. Her body is limp in my arms, her breath uneven, shallow.

I swear quietly, holding her more securely against me. What the fuck just happened?

This wasn’t fear, or her playing a game. This was real.

And I wasn’t expecting it.

I glance down at her, at the slight tremor in her fingers, at the way her face is drained of all color.

And for the first time in a long time, I feel something unfamiliar twist in my chest that I don’t like.

Because it feels too close to concern.

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14

LYRA

I WAKE UP GASPING.

My body jolts, my heart pounding so violently it shakes my ribs.

I'm not where I'm supposed to be. The air is thick with unfamiliar scents. The bed beneath me is too soft and luxurious, the heavy silken sheets strange against my skin.

Panic claws at my throat. I twist, sitting up too fast, my limbs unresponsive, my vision tilting sideways.

Where the *fuck* am I?

Fear explodes through my veins, clamping down on me like claws digging into my skin. Then a soft voice cuts through the static exploding in my brain.

"Hey, hey—breathe, Lyra. It's okay. You're okay."

My head whips to the sound, my pulse slowing when I register the familiar shape of Milena sitting beside me.

She's perched on the edge of the bed, legs tucked underneath her, her expression calming and grounding as she smiles warmly at me.

"You're *okay*," she says reassuringly.

I don't even realize I have the sheets in a death grip until Milena reaches forward and pries my fingers loose with gentle insistence.

I exhale shakily. “What…?” My voice comes out hoarse, thick with confusion.

Milena’s eyes soften. “You fainted at the club,” she murmurs, squeezing my hand briefly before pulling back.

Right. The club.

Instantly, my mind is flicking to the heat of Carmine’s body against mine. His voice in my ear. The suffocating, insistent press of the music, the couple in the corner…

It all comes back in a rush.

And then you fucking FAINTED in his lap.

I cringe.

Shoot me now.

At least Milena is here. That means I’m safe.

I let out a slow, relieved breath. “Where…?”

“The guest room at my place,” she smiles. “The girls are all here, too.” Her mouth twists. “We… We were worried about you.”

I force a weak smile to my lips. Then I try to shove the covers off me and get up, but my sluggish limbs betray me. The room tilts nauseatingly, and I brace a hand against the mattress to keep from toppling over.

“Hey-hey, hang on,” Milena murmurs, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Take it easy.”

I barely hear her.

All I can hear is Carmine's voice, echoing in my head. All I can remember is the feel of his hands on me, pinning me possessively to his lap.

“Just relax,” Milena says quietly.

I breathe in deeply, willing my mind to slow down. But it doesn’t.

Carmine forced me to look.

Forced me to watch that couple at the club, tangled together in their pleasure. And that did something ugly to me that ripped the past right open.

I can’t face sex like that. Not after what I saw when I walked into that room, so many years ago.

I was fourteen when I found the basement beneath the basement. The secret place no one was supposed to find.

I remember the bars.

The cold, damp air.

The sobbing.

The slapping sound of flesh against flesh.

I remember walking into the room and seeing my father—

I gag.

Even now, years later, the memory wrecks me. Because that’s when I stopped being a kid and realized the demon my father really was.

A soft touch on my arm pulls me back to the present. I inhale sharply, eyes flying open to see Milena watching me, her brows furrowed, lips pressed together.

“You okay?” she asks.

I nod quickly, forcing a neutral expression. “Yeah. Just…processing.”

Milena doesn’t push it. “You want me to hang out with you here for a little bit?”

I nod gratefully. “Would you?”

“Of course!” She grins as she leans back against the pillows next to me, stretching her long legs out. “You know, you’re kind of a lightweight,” she says after a moment. “I didn’t think you’d go down *that* easy.”

I let out a shaky laugh, happy for the change in subject.

My eyes start to droop again, and I lean my head to the side, resting it on her shoulder as the darkness seeps back into me.

She keeps talking to me, keeping me grounded. But her voice fades in and out, exhaustion pulling me under.

Then I hear her talking to someone in the room, but I can't quite make out the words.

And sleep pulls me deeper.

* * *

THE FAINT SCENT OF LEATHER, tangerine, and rosewood curls around me, lulling me into darkness. At some point, Milena shifts beside me. Her warmth disappears, but her comforting presence lingers in the room.

I drift again, deeper this time, until—

Something's wrong. The air is different.

I stir, stretching lazily, expecting Milena. The second my eyes open, I jolt and my stomach plummets, my body locking up.

Milena isn't on the edge of the bed.

Carmine is.

He sits there, completely at ease, studying me with that cold, unreadable gaze.

"You fainted," he says.

The room is still shrouded in shadows, the heavy curtains blocking out most of the city lights outside.

I swallow hard. "I think I was just tired. I drank too much. It was nothing."

He doesn't blink, doesn't move, but I can feel him assessing, analyzing, picking me apart piece by piece.

“You weren't drinking that much. And ‘nothing’ doesn’t make someone faint,” he says smoothly. “Try again.”

I press my lips together, willing myself to hold his gaze.

“Tell me.” His voice is calm, too calm.

I shake my head, not willing to go there.

He peers at me. “You couldn’t watch that couple in the club,” he murmurs. “And yet, it’s not sex in general that sends you into fainting spells.”

I swallow. “You don’t know that.”

“I do, actually,” he growls. “Because twice now, I’ve felt your greedy little pussy come on my fingers—quite enthusiastically, I should add—and there was a distinct absence of you passing out both times.”

Heat flares across my cheeks, my fingers twitching on the sheets. I open my mouth, but no words come out.

Carmine leans forward, his presence overwhelming.

“Explain that to me,” he says pointedly.

“I…”

I shiver as Carmine’s hand takes hold of the sheet covering me and tugs, slowly pulling it down.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I stammer.

“Asking you a question.”

“No, I mean…” My eyes slide down to where he’s pulled the sheet all the way off, leaving me lying in bed in my dress from the club.

“Do you watch porn?”

I balk, my eyes snapping back to his. “*Excuse me*?”

“You obviously enjoy—or at least have—certain kinks.”

My brows knit. “What are you talking about?”

“You like to have control taken away from you.”

It's so nakedly exposing, the way he just lets the words hang there. I feel my face begin to burn as something dark and twisted begins to curl and claw inside me.

“I—”

“You liked it when I chased you.”

My lips purse in a desperate attempt to put up a defiant front.

“You don’t know that.”

Carmine smirks. “Your pussy being *drenched* when I caught you says otherwise, but you’re welcome to continue this farcical debate if you like.”

Heat throbs in my cheeks as I shrink into the bed at my back.

“My question regarding porn stems from the fact that you clearly know what you like.” His eyes drag over me. “What turns you on. And being chased and forced and restrained aren’t exactly desires you’d realize you had from watching a romantic comedy. So, again: do you watch porn.”

Embarrassment flames over my face.

“*No,*” I mumble…truthfully.

I jolt when Carmine abruptly reaches out and *pinches my fucking nipple* through my dress. I gasp, wincing in pain but also throbbing from the electric sensation of his thumb and finger twisting the aching, peaked point through the silk.

“What the fuck!” I yelp.

“Tell the truth,” he growls, his piercing blue eyes locked onto mine as his fingers roll my nipple again.

“I *am!*” I blurt. “I—”

When he pinches again, I’m unable to stop the shaky whimper that creeps into my voice.

He smirks darkly. “Hmm. Apparently we can add at least some degree of pain, or perhaps nipple torture, to your list of kinks.”

I try to will the heat from my face. “I…I don’t have a *list of kinks*.”

“Of course you do,” he says matter-of-factly. “Everybody does. We’ve just collectively decided that it’s not something to be talked about, which seems counter-productive to one's basic enjoyment of life, if you ask me.”

I purse my lips. “Yeah? Then what about you, hmm?” I throw back at him. “How about we pull your dirty secrets out into the open and analyze—”

“Primal kink, consensual non-consent, restraints—on *you*, not me—extreme dominance and control, impact play, seeing your body marked with my bruises and covered with my cum, and, as you may already have guessed, a *roaring* need to chase you down and fuck you without mercy.” He lists them as casually as a burger order at a takeout window. “I think that covers it.”

I gape at him. I don’t even know what a primal kink *is*—or impact play, for that matter. But I feel like asking him is knocking on a door I’m definitely not prepared to open.

“Now,” Carmine says, clearing his throat. “We were discussing your porn viewing."

“I *don’t* watch porn! I—” My mouth snaps shut.

Carmine’s brow arches expectantly.

“I…*I read it*, okay?” I mumble. “I don’t *watch*.”

“Romance books.”

I swallow, mortified, turning away from him. “And…erotica. Fan fiction.”

Jesus, why am I freely admitting this to him?

Carmine’s hand suddenly lands on my bare knee. I shiver, glancing down and watching with my breath caught in my throat as he slides it higher, moving to the hem of my dress. He takes the material in his fist, pushing it higher up my thighs.

“*Stop it*,” I choke without a single ounce of meaning behind it.

“No.”

God help me, the way my core tightens when he says that word…

I shudder when he pushes the dress up over my panties, leaving it bunched at my hips. It feels like I’m watching in slow motion, helpless—maybe unwilling—to do anything to stop him as he reaches for my thong.

“*Carmine…*” I whisper hoarsely. “*W-what are you doing*?”

“Whatever I like, little dancer.”

A vicious, throbbing blackness closes in around me, snarling.

Whatever I like…

I'm frozen, unable to move, just staring at his hands reaching for me. His fingers slip under the waist of my black lace panties, his knuckles brushing over my heated skin. He starts to tug, peeling them down as my breath arrests in my throat.

“You like studying people,” he murmurs, his voice almost clinical in its detached coldness. “You want to understand what makes them tick. What drives them.”

My pulse hammers against my ribs as he slowly continues to tug my panties down. Neon lights from outside peek around the edges of the curtains and illuminate my bare sex as he peels the lace away from my pussy.

Heat erupts over my face.

I’m *wet*.

“But unlike you, little dancer,” he continues, his voice smooth and dangerous, “I don’t just observe. I push. I break. I like to see what happens when people come apart, and find out what’s left after they do.”

His lips pull to a dark, amused, taunting smile.

“And you,” he murmurs, his thumb pressing on my racing pulse, “are my newest obsession.”

His eyes drop between my legs.

“Can’t watch sex,” he muses, almost too himself. “And yet, merely talking about it, you’re already *drenched* for me.”

Carmine’s fingers skim my thigh, teasing, lingering, a slow, deliberate glide that sets every nerve on fire.

Tearing down the walls I’ve spent years reinforcing.

His touch is light and taunting, but his gaze isn't. It burns with dark, deep, hunger.

“Why is it,” he murmurs, his fingers ghosting higher, closer, making me tremble, “that you can’t even *look* at something as natural as sex…”

His touch dips lower and my body betrays me, heat coiling, a sharp, aching pulse sparking through my limbs.

“…but you can handle this?”

I try to speak, to breathe, to think, but his fingers keep moving, each lazy, controlled motion dragging me deeper into something I can’t fight.

Don’t want to fight.

I suck in a sharp breath, my hands twisting and gripping the sheets, my nails digging into the fabric.

Carmine watches me struggle, his expression calm, detached—like he’s studying me, documenting every tiny reaction.

“Tell me,” he murmurs, his voice smooth and utterly in control, “*why* can’t you even watch? What is it about it that makes you shut down?”

I shake my head helplessly.

I can’t say it. The memory is too sharp, too consuming. Too devastating.

Suddenly, I’m not able to say *anything at all*. Because his fingers are on my pussy, gliding up my lips, spreading them open. He rolls a finger over my throbbing clit, making my entire body jolt. I clamp my mouth shut, but not

quickly enough to prevent the choked, needy whimper from erupting out of my throat.

Carmine chuckles, low and mocking, his thumb stroking and rolling over my clit again as I shake under his touch.

“Can’t even look at other people touching,” he murmurs, his tone deceptively smooth, almost meditative. “But when it’s me? You fall apart.”

I swallow hard as his hand dips lower, spreading my lips open. He starts to sink one finger into me, making me melt, dragging a whine from my lips.

I allow my eyes to slide to his, and instantly, all the breath is sucked from my lungs.

It’s…haunting, the way he’s looking at me. It’s a mix of dark, possessive intimacy, and the objective way a scientist might study an experiment.

Like I’m a puzzle he’s trying to crack open and take apart, piece by piece.

He leans in, his lips hovering just against my ear.

“Or is it when *anyone* touches you?”

The words feel like a blade. My entire body tenses, my fingers curling into the sheets.

I don’t answer.

I can’t.

His fingers still, a slow darkness glinting in his eyes. Suddenly, his other hand moves to my neck. I shudder as his long fingers wrap around my throat, possessive, unrelenting.

“*Answer me*.”

His voice is low, dangerous.

A command. A warning.

I clench my jaw, shaking my head.

He tightens his grip slightly, not enough to hurt but enough to remind me of his strength and power. At the same time, he sinks a second finger into me, stroking them slowly in and out of my slickness as he adds pressure to my windpipe.

Holy fuck…

“Lyra.”

I exhale shakily.

“I…I don’t know,” I blurt, my voice barely above a whisper.

His brows furrow slightly.

“Not an answer,” he snarls.

“It *is* an answer,” I choke out. “I honestly *don’t. Know*.”

Carmine pauses.

His fingers stop where they are, still deep inside of me. But his grip on my throat doesn’t loosen.

Suddenly, his brow furrows, his sharp blue eyes dragging to lock with mine as his head tilts curiously to the side.

“Are you a virgin?”

My breath catches violently.

I turn my face away, but Carmine’s fingers splay up from my throat, gripping my jaw and twisting my head, forcing me to look at him.

“*Answer me*, little dancer,” he pushes, his voice dropping to a rough whisper. “Has any other man touched you like this? Or tasted you?” I shudder as pure blackness seems to drape over his eyes. “Or *fucked you*,” he growls.

My throat works under his hand. My pulse hums as I feel his thick fingers deep inside of me.

“*Are you a virgin*,” he rasps darkly.

“*Yes*,” I choke.

Carmine’s grin spreads, slow and wicked.

“Well, we’ll have to fix that,” he muses.

My breath catches. A sharp pulse of fear. Of, God help me, anticipation, shooting through me.

I stare at him, my heart hammering.

Slowly, he slips his fingers from between my legs. I watch in a trance as he brings them to his lips, his eyes locking with mine as he uses his tongue to slowly lick them clean.

“Delicious,” he growls quietly. “And I can’t wait to find out how sweet your virgin blood tastes when I *do* fuck you.”

I gasp sharply as he suddenly goes over me, straddling my body, his knees bracketing my waist. His hand slides from my throat, pushing up my jaw and into my hair, which he grabs in a tight fist at the back of my nape, tugging my head back slightly.

“I *am* going to fuck you,” he murmurs, leaning down and letting his lips brush against mine. “But not tonight.”

Then he kisses me.

Hard. Deep. Vicious.

It’s not soft or careful. It’s a claim. A brand. A subjugation.

His teeth scrape against my lower lip, his tongue sweeping against mine, coaxing, demanding, consuming.

I can feel it in my bones.

He’s still kissing me as he reaches down and grabs the bunched-up hem of my dress. He pushes it up my body, pulling away from my mouth as he slips it over my head and up my arms. But he leaves it tangled around my wrists, and instead of pulling it off entirely, he suddenly binds the dress to the iron bar across the top of the headboard.

My pulse jangles. My eyes bulge wide as I suddenly find myself bound and tied.

And naked.

With a psychopath kneeling astride me who seems quite willing to do whatever he wants to me.

I whimper when Carmine leans down to crush his lips to mine again, feasting on my shivers and gasps. His mouth moves lower, his teeth scraping my neck and then my collarbone, then lower, kissing, biting.

His breath is hot against my chest. His tongue drags over my skin, down one slope as he cups my breast. I gasp sharply, crying out when his teeth bite down *hard* on one tender nipple, zapping bolts of pain and pleasure electrically through my core. My back aches off the bed as he moves to the other one, savaging it as well as he reaches up to wrap a powerful hand around my throat again.

Then, he moves lower.

My skin pebbles, my stomach caving as Carmine's mouth trails down my ribs. His teeth drag over my skin, biting me here and there and making me whine sharply. My wrists strain and twist at my binds, but I'm pinned where I am as his mouth drags slowly and methodically down my body.

I watch as if observing from outside my own body as he strips my panties the rest of the way off. He moves between my legs, spreading them wide apart as my breath catches. His piercing blue eyes raise to mine over the mound of my sex, a savageness throbbing in them that ignites my very blood.

Suddenly, I'm not quite sure if Carmine is about to devour me or literally eat me for a meal.

Luckily, I don't have to wait long to find out.

His mouth dips between my thighs, and suddenly, I'm feeling the single most intensely pleasurable feeling I ever have in my life.

Holy. Fucking. *Fuck*.

My entire body arches off the bed, and the sound that drags from my throat as his tongue dances over me is one I didn't even know I was capable of making.

His tongue delves between my lips, dragging slowly and languidly up to my clit.

Sweet merciful fuck…

I cry out, moaning in pleasure as his tongue swirls over my aching bud. My hips rise to his mouth, only for his strong hands to grip my hips and pin them back down to the bed.

He delves between my lips, lapping up and down my seam before he suddenly captures my clit between his lips. He sucks on it, batting his tongue back and forth across the throbbing nerves and making me cry out sharply.

"I'd lower your greedy moans, little dancer," he murmurs into my thigh. "All your friends are right down the hall, I'm sure only half-occupied by *my* friends." His eyes drag up to mine over my trembling body. "You wouldn't want them all to hear what a greedy little slut you are, would you?"

His mouth dips again, and his tongue plunges into me. My eyes roll back as I arch off the bed, squirming and gasping, helpless to stop the loud cry that falls from my lips.

"The next time you do that, I might just have to gag you with your panties."

He lowers his mouth again. This time, he sucks my clit hard between his lips and rams two fingers into me. The pleasure is *intense*, and captivating.

…And it's completely impossible to keep quiet.

I try to slam a hand over my mouth before I cry out again. But then I remember that they're bound to the headboard of Milena's guest bed.

"I did warn you."

Suddenly, my eyes bulge as I feel wet lace shoved to my lips. Startled, I open my mouth, but I don't get a word out before he stuffs the lace into my mouth, silencing me.

…With my own panties.

His lips and tongue go back to tormenting my clit as he sinks two fingers into me and scissors them deep. A low moan wrenches through me as I drown in the pleasure he's wringing from my body. He sucks harder on my throbbing clit, bringing me right to the brink before he backs off again.

A whine of frustration and pleasure rips from my throat.

Loudly.

"Apparently, you need something more than panties to plug up that mouth of yours."

Suddenly, he's pulling away from between my legs and moving up the bed on his knees. I twist my head, eyes wide as he kneels next to my face, his hand tugging at his belt.

My pulse jangles.

Raw desire and more than a little fear spike in my core.

I watch as Carmine opens his belt, then the button of his dark jeans. The zipper tugs down, and then his hand slips inside, sliding into his black boxers. One hand moves in a slow stroking motion that brings raw heat to my face. The other reaches out and deftly pulls my spit-soaked panties from my mouth.

Suddenly, he pulls his cock out, and my jaw *drops*.

Holy. Fucking. Hell.

It's not just my lack of personal experience, or the fact that I don't ever watch porn.

…It's that he's fucking *huge*.

Again, it's not because I don't personally have anything to compare it to. It's that even his own large, masculine hand can barely fit around it, and only covers maybe a third of it as he strokes the base.

I stare at the swollen head, a clear drop of fluid beading at the tip and slowly running down one of his throbbing veins.

“Yes, I’d keep your jaw wide open,” he growls quietly. “You’ll need it just like that.”

There’s no preamble. No warning. Nothing. One moment, he’s stroking his cock in front of my face. The next, he’s grabbing a fist of my hair and guiding his huge dick between my lips.

I shiver at the silky, throbbingly hard feel of him invading my mouth. I gag instantly, but he doesn’t back off. He just stays there, conquering my lips and tongue as I try and get used to the size of the cock stretching my jaw.

“I’m going to guess from your earlier comment, the way you fainted watching someone make out in a club, and the simple reality that it’s clear you’re not sure what the fuck you’re doing that you’ve never sucked a cock before?”

I can’t answer. Fuck me, I can barely *breathe* with the size of him stretching my mouth open. But when my eyes lift to his, I can see the truth reflected in his fierce gaze.

“*Curious*,” he murmurs darkly. “I can’t say that virgins have ever appealed to me in the slightest. But *you*, little dancer…”

He groans as his fist tightens in my hair, his hips clenching as he pushes his cock a little deeper into my mouth.

“*You* certainly do. Now, I’m going to leave my dick right here in your mouth.” His lips curl. “It’s not that I’m worried about *your* friends hearing you shatter for me. It’s that if *my friends* were to hear, I’d be forced to cut their throats, and that would be…inconvenient.”

I shiver at how frankly he says it. It’s not dark gallows humor. He’s not trying to be edgy. It’s just *him*, who he really is. It feels weirdly intimate, having him dropping the mask so completely with me.

Carmine twists around, keeping his cock between my lips. He reaches down over my body, his hand sliding under my ass and gripping me tightly as he pulls my hips up and lowers his mouth at the same time.

Oh shit…

My loud whimper is muffled around his bulging dick as his tongue dances over my clit again. He sucks it back between his lips, tormenting it with the tip of his tongue and instantly shoving me right back as high as I was before.

I moan louder, humming and drooling all over his cock. I can barely move my head, but my tongue can’t help but explore his swollen head, teasing over the ridge and testing the hole at the tip.

Carmine groans deeply, his dick swelling even harder between my lips.

“Yes, *suck*, just like that, little dancer,” he growls against my pussy. “Use your tongue. Slowly. Like that. Tease my cock.”

His tongue swirls around my clit, sucking and nibbling at the tender bud as my legs begin to shake. One of his hands slips up between my thighs from behind, and when he sinks two fingers into me again, I can barely focus on anything but the pleasure he’s pulling from my body.

“Allow me to help,” he murmurs. Suddenly, his cock is sliding out and then thrusting back into my mouth, deep. I sputter and choke, but he doesn’t stop or slow. At first, it's disorienting and almost demeaning, feeling him use my mouth like this.

Except as he keeps doing it, slowly, something clicks inside me.

Something flickers to life, the flame growing hotter.

You clearly know what you like. What turns you on. Being chased.

Restrained.

Forced.

Fire spreads through me like blood staining a sheet. Like a storm cloud rolling across the sky until it blankets everything in blackness and the sharp crackle of lightning.

It’s a simple, terrifying truth that hits me just as I’m about to explode against his tongue.

He’s right.

I do know what I like, I'm just in constant fear of admitting it even to myself. Even after I read it in especially steamy fanfics or darker romance books from TikTok.

But now he's making me confront it as he rips the pleasure from every nerve in my body.

I want this.

I crave this.

The loss of control. The restraint.

Being forced.

And that moment of realization is exactly when I start to come.

Mercifully, if even just to save himself from being bitten, Carmine slides his cock from my raw, swollen lips just as I start to shatter. His tongue rolls over my clit, his lips sucking hard as my head snaps back, my arms jerking against their binds.

"*Oh God*!"

"Uh-uh," Carmine snarls into my pussy. "Say *my* name when you come. I don't share what's mine—not even with God."

His fingers curl inside me, turning me to jelly as I cry out and arch my back off the bed.

"*Carmine*!"

Just as I'm coming all over again, he does something completely unexpected and unhinged that shatters whatever grasp on reality I have left.

He turns his mouth against my inner thigh, high up near my throbbing pussy, and without warning, *he bites me*.

Hard. Really, *really* hard.

My whole world jolts as I twist my head violently and scream into my own shoulder, my eyes squeezed shut.

Suddenly, he's shifting on the bed. A low growl rumbles in his chest as he kneels beside me. My eyes open, and my breath catches when I see his forearms ripple as he strokes his huge, swollen dick right over me, his eyes shrouded in a lethal sort of blackness.

Suddenly, with a low grunt, he's coming.

…All over me.

I gasp as hot cum splatters and streaks on my skin, covering my breasts, dripping over my nipples. It lands in ropes across my stomach and hips, and suddenly I'm flinching when I feel the hot drips of it coating my mouth, cheeks and neck.

The whole world stops as Carmine strokes his bulging cock once more and then sits back on his haunches, like a beast after a kill, looking down on me with dark, satisfied arousal all over his face.

And smears of red.

My blood, from when he bit me and broke the skin, mixed with *my own cum*, all over his chin. I go still, my pulse skipping as his eyes lock with mine.

Holding and arresting me. Pinning and consuming me.

Slowly, he brings a hand up, using his thumb to wipe the mix of cum and blood from his lips and into his mouth.

"*Delicious*," he growls quietly. "I can't wait to break through your virginity and taste the ruin I leave behind between your thighs."

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15

LYRA

THE FINAL NOTES of Tchaikovsky’s *pas de trois* echo through the empty theater as I hit my end position.

Brooklyn mirrors the movement on the other side of Vaughn, our chests still heaving with exertion.

I take a deep breath and let the moment settle, before exhaling and relaxing, bent forward, spent.

The past couple of weeks since it came out that I was marrying Carmine Barone have been a whirlwind.

At the theater, the news swept through the company like wildfire. At first, I couldn’t set foot in the dressing room without hearing whispers—some curious, some tinged with a bit of jealously, or worse, scorn and judgement.

Some people were just outright confused. Milena had to shut down at least three ridiculous theories, ranging from *she must be pregnant* to *she must have blackmailed him into it.*

Which, technically, isn’t *entirely* false.

But it was Bianca who really put a stop to it. Not with any loud declarations or dramatic speeches. Just a few well-placed looks, a couple of quietly spoken words, and suddenly, the rumor mill, mercifully, died a swift death.

Of course, deflecting rumors hasn't been the only hazard that comes with getting engaged to Carmine. Milena caught sight of the bite mark he left on

my inner thigh when we were changing at the end of the afternoon—and, of course, had a fucking field day with it.

I'd barely tugged my tights off when she zeroed in on it like a shark scenting blood.

"Oh my fucking *God*," she gasped, grinning. "Don't tell me that is a *bite mark*."

I'd whipped around to glare at her, but it was too late. She was already cackling, calling Evelina over, demanding a full forensic analysis.

But now, with just two days to go before I'm bound forever to that madman, it's clear everyone around me understands that the time for joking is *over*.

"Well," Vaughn mutters next to me on stage, still catching his breath. "That was sufficiently brutal."

Brooklyn groans, rolling her shoulders. "Seriously. I need ice. Maybe a priest."

"Speaking of priest…" Vaughn grins and turns to me. "What's the countdown again?"

Brooklyn sighs, shooting Vaughn a look. "Two days. Seriously, how hard is it to remember that? Stop asking her."

I flash her a grateful grin.

Vaughn rolls his eyes. "It might have helped if yours truly had gotten a fucking wedding invite," he grunts, rolling his muscled shoulders and stretching his veined forearms.

I sigh. "Okay, a, I had nothing to do with the guest list, believe me. And b, it's a small wedding."

Vaughn snorts, arching a sarcasm-laden brow. "How small?"

Shit.

I wince as I raise my eyes to his. "Um, two hundred guests?"

Vaughn and Brooklyn laugh loudly, shaking their heads.

“Just two hundred of your closest personal friends,” Vaughn snickers. “Dude, I don’t even *know* two hundred people.”

Brooklyn snorts loudly. “If we include people *your dick* knows, are we getting closer?”

Vaughn feigns mock indignation.

“I feel like I’m being slut-shamed.”

“Well, that’s because you’re kinda a slut,” Brooklyn grins.

Vaughn rolls his eyes and flips her off before turning back to me. “Let me at least see it.”

I frown. “See what?”

He grins salaciously. “The fucking bite mark I heard The Godfather gave you on your pussy.”

My jaw drops.

“Okay, first of all, *no*,” I snap testily. “And secondly, he did not *bite me* on my…my…” I swallow. “That’s just not true.”

“Milena said that psycho bit your fucking pussy—”

“It was my *thigh*! Jesus!!” I shriek, before realizing what I’ve done.

Goddammit.

Vaughn's grin gets even wider. “So, how *is it*, fucking mafia royalty?”

My face throbs as I turn away, sliding to the floor to stretch my calves.

“I have no idea.”

“Seriously?” Vaughn walks over and plants himself directly back in my line of sight.

“Seriously,” I mutter.

“Hold up. You’ve been *engaged* to Mr. Broody Psycho-hot Mafia for weeks now, and *you haven’t fucked him*?”

When I just shrug, Vaughn groans.

“Banging a mafia prince or princess is totally on my sexual bucket list. *You* get it served up on a platter and you say ‘pass’.” He sighs and turns to Brooklyn. “The fucking unmitigated *gall*.”

I snort, shaking my head as the three of us move to exit the stage. Just as I’m about to step into the wings, my name is called from the shadows of the fourth row.

“Lyra.”

I freeze.

Madame Kuzmina’s voice is, as always, calm but commanding—the kind of tone that’s never really a request.

Brooklyn and Vaughn pause, glancing at me.

Kuzmina barely misses a beat. “You two can go,” she says simply.

Vaughn lifts a brow, but Brooklyn nudges him, pushing him toward the dressing rooms.

Crap. Madame Kuzmina isn’t someone who just summons people without reason.

She moves down the aisle a few rows, still barely lit by the stage lights. She raises one of her hands and beckons.

“Come.”

I nod, quickly stepping to the edge of the stage and clambering down before making my way to her.

Madame Kuzmina has a way of coming off as ancient, like she’s a witch who's mastered time spells or something. But in reality, she’s not actually that old. Gun to my head, I’d have to say mid-to-late thirties.

She’s perpetually dressed in dark shawls, adding to her vibe of a Roma fortune teller, or a witch. But up close, she’s got an elegant edge. Her features are sharp, but there’s a shrewd beauty to her, with dark eyes that seem to be constantly assessing.

“M-madame?” I ask with a nervous smile.

She just nods her chin. “Follow me.”

She turns and walks away. I swallow uncomfortably, wiping my damp palms on my leotard, and follow.

* * *

I’VE NEVER BEEN in Madame Kuzmina’s private study in the three years I’ve been dancing with the Zakharova. I don’t know if *anyone* in the company has.

The room is dark, old-world elegant, the air thick with the scent of aged paper and faded perfume. Behind her desk, a bank of windows overlooks the upper orchestra seats and the stage below.

Posters of legendary ballet productions line the walls, alongside framed black-and-white photos of dancers frozen in action.

A piano sits in the corner, its black lacquered surface gleaming in the dim light. Shelves upon shelves of vinyl records fill the space, meticulously categorized.

Madame Kuzmina gestures toward a chair.

“Please, sit,” she purrs in her slightly Russian accent.

I do so, back ramrod straight, hands clasped in my lap.

There’s a pause.

I finally break the silence. “Why did you wish to talk to me, Madame?”

Kuzmina arches a brow fiercely.

“*I* didn’t.”

I blink. “What?”

She turns, moving toward the door, then opens it, and I jump to my feet when a man I know walks in.

“Thank you, Magda,” Kir Nikolayev murmurs, his deep, smooth voice laced with authority.

Madame Kuzmina nods quietly to him before turning to let her eyes sweep over me impassively. Then she closes the door behind her, leaving us alone.

For a moment, the room is silent. Kir stands by the door in a dark gray suit, his piercing eyes appraising me. Then, with a nod, he moves across the room, sweeping past me to sit in Madame Kuzmina’s chair across the desk from me. He settles back, clearly waiting for me to sit as well. When I do, he clears his throat.

“It’s been some time, hasn’t it, Lyra?”

Kir’s voice is smooth, like a blade dragging along silk. I grip the arms of the chair, my pulse skipping painfully in my neck.

We’ve seen each other at Zakharova events. But it’s been years since we spoke alone like this. But I remember exactly where I was the last time we did.

It was a hotel room in the Bronx, the air stale from my mother’s cigarettes. The walls too thin, the cheap comforter scratchy on my arms as I sat on the edge of the bed, feeling as hollow as the house we’d left behind.

The house that was now marked off with crime scene tape.

I was fourteen and had just had the foundations of my reality destroyed, my faith in men shattered, my belief in family, love, and truth all broken thanks to my fateful exploration of the far end of our basement that my father had always told me to stay away from.

Kir had walked into the hotel room like he owned the place—calm, controlled—but hadn’t looked at me with cruelty.

He’d looked at me like I was a problem to be solved.

“Your father has been excommunicated from my organization, Lyra,” Kir had said, his voice tight. *“Do you know what that means?”*

I’d shaken my head.

“It means he’s not protected by us anymore, not after what he did. Which means you are free to tell the police everything you know to put him in a deep hole, which is where he belongs.”

I'd hesitated.

Kir had leaned in slightly, his presence heavy and suffocating.

“You and your mother will not face any kind of reprisal for aiding in the case against your father.”

So, I talked.

I testified.

And Arkadi went to prison.

Now, years later, Kir is studying me like I’m still that girl sitting on the edge of a hotel bed, waiting to see what happens next.

“Forgive the dramatics of meeting you this way,” Kir finally says, turning slightly, his hands steepled against the dark suit pulled across his firm chest. “You’ll understand in a moment why I didn’t want our conversation overheard.”

I lick my lips, swallowing. “What do you want?”

Kir’s lips tilt into something that isn’t quite a smile as he shifts, leaning closer, and I swear, the actual *air* in the room tightens.

Kir is, objectively, gorgeous. The kind of good-looking that sucks all the air out of the room. It’s not in the way Carmine is attractive—sharp, savage, and untamed.

Kir is refined, carrying himself with quiet, utterly devastating confidence. He’s older, radiates power, and always seems dangerously in control.

“I wanted to speak to you,” he says lightly, tapping his fingers on the desk in front of him, “because I’ve been thinking about your father’s enemies—of which, you’ll be I'm sure completely unsurprised to hear, he had plenty.”

The blood in my veins chills.

Kir leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Yet they’ve left you and your mother alone up till now. Do you know why?”

I shake my head.

“Because you had nothing to offer them.” His tone is neutral, detached. “You and your mother were barely scraping by. Therefore, no reason for them to care.”

His gaze narrows.

“But now you’re marrying Carmine Barone.”

He lets that sink in.

“Arkadi made a lot of enemies,” Kir continues. “In life, *and* in death.”

I flinch. Kir notices.

He shifts again, his voice dropping lower. “I heard about Popov.” Kir shakes his head. “If you needed money, you should have come to me.”

I swallow hard. “I don’t—”

“You’re *marrying* him for it,” Kir says evenly. “Carmine, I mean.”

I shake my head too quickly. “It’s—it's not like that.”

Kir doesn’t look convinced.

“Can I assume your new fiancé is the reason Popov no longer has a pulse?” He arches his brow. “Or *hands*, for that matter?”

I freeze, eyes bulging.

Kir leans back, studying me again. "That, however, is not why I wanted to sit down with you today." He frowns, tapping the desk again with one hand

as he strokes his chiseled jawline with the other thoughtfully. "I don’t want to alarm you," he murmurs, "but I heard a rumor."

A rumor.

My fingers tighten in my lap. "What kind of rumor?"

Kir’s expression doesn’t change, but his ice-blue, predatory eyes hold mine in place.

"The kind that’s designed to scare you."

He sighs, rubbing his jaw. “I can assume you know who Marcus Chen is?”

My stomach turns. Of course I do.

Marcus Chen is the conspiracy theorist-slash-snake-oil-salesman who run The Truth Report podcast and blog. He’s basically the epicenter of *all* of the especially ridiculous, horrifying theories about my father’s crimes and my connection to them.

The motherfucker who’s leaked my phone number and my address to his rabid, lunatic fans multiple times. The one who sends grieving people like Chris Hodgkins my way with twisted lies roaring in their heads about my connection to their dead loved ones.

Kir watches my reaction carefully.

“He’s publishing a new article later tonight,” he says smoothly. “And it’s… not pretty.”

I swallow hard. "What does it say?"

Kir exhales slowly. "That your father isn’t dead. That his body was never recovered. That the prison autopsy was fabricated." He holds up a hand as I open my mouth. "It’s all bullshit. But bullshit spreads fast."

I sway slightly. The room tilts.

Kir sits back, crossing one leg over the other. "I could, of course, pay him a visit. Make him rethink his career choices." His tone is dry and laced with something sharp. "But that would only make him double down. If I go after him, he’ll publish the story with twice the effort."

I drag my tongue over my lips, trying to swallow past the sudden dryness in my throat. "So why are you telling me this?"

Kir studies me. "Because I wanted to reassure you before you heard it from someone else."

The air feels too thick.

He adjusts his suit jacket. "I wanted you to know that I am handling it. And that you have nothing to fear."

Something sharp twists inside of me. Darkness from the past claws up from the shadows, strangling me for a moment. But I force a tight smile, swallowing the unease curling through me. "Thank you for telling me."

Kir inclines his head. "One last thing."

I blink. "What?"

His piercing gaze hardens, voice dropping. "Are you being forced into this wedding?"

The words hit like a gunshot.

Kir leans forward slightly, his hands steepled in front of him. "If you're feeling pressured—whether for money, or for any other reason that makes you feel as if you don't have a choice—" He clears his throat, resting his hands on the edge of the desk, his gaze steel-cutting into me.

"Now is the time to say something. And I am the one to say it to."

The room goes still.

"I'm your way out, Lyra. I'm your lifeline, if you need it. But you have to tell me right the fuck now."

He leans in. "Do you need me to stop your wedding to Carmine Barone. Yes or no?"

The fact that I hesitate at all tells me I should probably be committed.

The fact that I don't immediately scream *"YES, SAVE ME, KIR!"* and leap across the desk into his arms is proof that I'm unwell, unfit to take care of

myself.

I could lie and say the reason I don’t say yes is that I’m scared of Carmine.

But the truth?

I don’t say yes because I might already be too tangled up in his darkness to break free.

I meet Kir’s gaze, forcing a smile. "Thank you," I say quietly. "But I’m okay."

Kir’s expression doesn’t change. He watches me, his gaze a little too sharp, a little too knowing.

Then he nods. "Very well."

He stands, adjusting his suit jacket. "I wish you a very happy and fulfilling marriage," he adds dryly.

He stops beside me as I rise. His brow furrows slightly. "Again, my intention wasn’t to scare you. Just to inform you."

I swallow. "Thanks."

Kir nods, his expression unreadable.

“Your father is *not* walking around like some vengeful ghost, Lyra."

He places a firm, powerful hand on my tense shoulder.

"Ghosts aren’t real."

I manage to keep my composure.

But the second he’s gone, the words I can’t shake from my head slither through my skull like a death sentence.

You’ll pay dearly for putting me away, moya dorogaya doch’.

Ghosts aren’t real.

But what happens if they are?

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16

THE HOUND

THE OLD STONE cathedral walls drink in the candlelight, casting flickering shadows across the vaulted ceiling.

I move soundlessly through the labyrinthine halls, my footsteps swallowed by the hush of the underground. At this point, the mask I'm currently wearing feels like a second skin. It should, given that I've worn it for almost a decade now.

Here—in Court—this is who I am.

The Hound, one of the five Shadow Kings, sitting as judge, jury, and if necessary, executioner of the accused.

In here, I'm not Carmine Barone. Not the mafia prince who's about to marry a woman who makes his veins burn every time she opens her mouth.

It's only in the last few years that we've become bolder and more active in our Black Court operations, but this all started ten years ago.

At Knightsblood University.

Back then, the five of us were simply various mafia heirs attending the prestigious, shadowy Ivy League college built for the sons and daughters of the underworld. We came from different families and different empires, but the five us all found ourselves as members of Para Bellum, one of the four elite clubs that have almost as long a history as Knightsblood itself.

There's the Ouroboros Society, for the information brokers. The Order, which seeks out the spies and assassins. The Reckless, calling to—well, that's fairly self-descriptive. They’re the warriors.

And then there’s Para Bellum: the strategists. The generals. The leaders.

That’s where the Black Court was born: on a dark night seeped in mayhem and vengeance. That was the first time we wore our masks. And after that first baptism in blood, we all knew this wasn’t going to be a one-time thing.

It’s not that any of us thought our fathers or our families or our institutions were weak. But the system itself was becoming complacent. Rot was creeping in around the edges.

And if there’s one thing I’ve always known on a visceral level, it’s that power without control is worthless.

So we built The Black Court: a system that would keep the chaos in check. Because criminals without a code of conduct are just animals.

And animals cannot rule.

In here, we aren’t who we are out *there*, bound by mafia politics, or opportunity, or family. In here, it’s all about choices. The choice to be right or to be wrong.

Innocent or guilty.

Fight or flight.

I pause by the carved, heavy wooden door to the inner sanctum. Then I roll my neck, take a breath and step inside. The chamber is steeped in shadows and flickering torchlight that casts jagged silhouettes against the stone walls.

Conversation pauses as I enter. The four other Shadow Kings—The Wolf, The Bull, The Raven and The Stag—are already seated around the ancient stone table, its surface carved with the same intricate runes that are on the walls of this underground cathedral.

Their black masks, each molded into the beast it represents, glint in the dim light.

I’m a little late, and it’s clear they’ve already been talking about this evening's subject at hand. The Raven glances at me, dipping his head. I clap a hand on The Bull’s firm, muscled shoulder before I take my seat at the table next to him.

The Wolf glances at me, then clears his throat and leans back in his chair.

“So glad you could fit us in, Hound.”

I roll my eyes under my mask.

“I had something to deal with.”

“We *all* have shit to deal with,” The Wolf mutters. “But when we agree to—”

“Enough.”

The Stag lifts his mask just enough to be able to slip a cigarette between his lips. The Zippo flickers and catches, then he leans in and lights the tip.

“Mind if I fucking continue?” The Wolf mutters with barely concealed annoyance, which is pretty much his default setting regarding the rest of the world.

“By all means,” The Stag growls quietly.

Beside me, The Bull chuckles to himself, shaking his head.

“*As I was saying*,” The Wolf grunts. “This isn’t about paranoia, it’s about being thorough and making sure there are no loose ends.”

The Raven exhales slowly, his fingers tapping the table with slow, deliberate movements.

“That depends,” he murmurs, “on what she knows. Or, worse, what *he* told her, if anything.”

The crackling of the fire is the only sound in the cavernous space.

I keep my expression blank behind the mask, my voice a controlled growl.

“I told you before,” I say. “There’s no evidence she knows anything. If she did, I’d know by now.”

The Bull shifts slightly, his mask turning toward me. “She showed up at one of our sessions, Hound. That alone is…suspicious.”

I exhale slowly, my fingers tapping the ancient carvings in the table’s surface.

I know what they’re dancing around.

Arkadi.

His secrets.

Concerning *us*.

I roll my shoulders, settling deeper into my chair. “We know Arkadi was dangerous. We know he was greedy. But what we’ve never learned is what he actually had on us.”

The Wolf watches me carefully. “Yeah, which is exactly the fucking problem.” He sighs, rapping the table with his knuckles, like he just needs *some way* to get rid of the energy that hums through him.

“You met with him,” he says. “Before it all fell apart.”

I nod. “I did.”

The room is silent. They already know the story.

Arkadi Ostrov had a recording, he claimed, that he could use to blackmail The Black Court and all of us.

He didn’t say what he had, where he kept it, or how much he knew. Just that he wanted a *fuckton* of money for it.

I met with him, gauged the threat, and we agreed to talk again.

But that never happened because two days later, his fourteen-year-old daughter ran from their house, screaming to the neighbors there were girls locked in the basement.

The FBI descended, Arkadi was arrested, and we never found the recording.

I exhale, dragging a hand over the back of my neck.

“If he had something, the Feds didn’t find it,” I say.

The Raven’s mask glints in the firelight as he tips his head. “Not that we *know of*.”

There’s a stretch of silence. Then, The Stag speaks again. “And now, his daughter is back in our world.”

I feel something hot suddenly coil inside me. “She's not involved with this,” I say sharply.

The Wolf’s gaze flicks to me. “She’s about to marry you. That *makes* her involved.”

I press my hands against the stone table, exhaling slowly. I don’t like where this is going. And I don’t like the way they’re talking about her. Like she’s just another loose end to tie up.

The Raven leans forward slightly. “No one’s trying to piss you off, Hound. We’re just—”

“Succeeding,” I snarl.

The Raven is silent for a moment before he replies.

“You really believe she doesn’t know anything?”

“Yes,” I say flatly.

“But you can't prove it,” The Wolf grunts.

My head snaps in his direction. “Exactly how would you like me to prove a negative, motherfucker.”

I can *feel* his eyes narrowing behind his mask.

“Watch your fucking tone,” he grunts back.

“Why don't we take it down a notch,” The Raven says, his voice rising along with his hands. “Everybody just take a step back.”

The Bull exhales noisily behind his mask. “Look, we trust you, Hound. We just don’t trust *her*.”

Possessiveness flares inside me—hot, unexpected.

I should stamp it down and bury it deep, but I don’t.

Instead, I whirl on him. And before any of them can react, I’ve stood abruptly and grabbed The Bull by the collar, yanking him into me, looming over him.

“You're talking about the woman who is going to be *my wife*,” I snarl viciously.

For a moment, no one speaks.

Then I feel a hand on my shoulder. I glance back, seeing The Raven standing and slowly shaking his head, telling me wordlessly to calm the fuck down.

The Stag exhales smoke through his nose, shifting slightly in his chair.

“No one needs to prove a negative. We just need to know for certain if she knows anything, or if she knows what her father had on this Court.”

“And *again*,” I mutter, letting go of The Bull’s collar. “I’m on top of it.”

“I suppose that means you’re going through with the wedding?” The Bull grunts sarcastically.

I don’t answer.

“Well,” The Wolf shrugs, leaning back in his chair, “let’s hope you don’t regret it.”

I push back from the table quietly.

“I think we’re all quite aware that I’m not overly burdened with the concept,” I murmur. I button my jacket before I let my eyes drag over the rest of the group. “I’ll handle it. Like we *always* handle it.”

I push open the doors and step into the darkness, then let them close behind me with a resounding thud.

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17

LYRA

“WELL, I’m sure you don’t want to hear it…”

Milena’s eyes meet mine in the mirror.

“But you look fucking amazing.”

I know I should feel *something*. Excitement. Nerves. The thrill of anticipation. Fuck, even fear.

Nope. I just feel numb.

The mirror in front of me reflects a stranger. A girl all in white, her red hair falling in perfect waves over the delicate lace. Her eyes are vacant, as if it's someone else’s life she's watching unfold.

Milena stands behind me, her fingers fastening the last pearl button on my gown. The fabric is exquisite—hand-stitched French gossamer with intricate beading that probably took artisans months to complete. It’s a dress fit for royalty. But in the mirror, I don't see a queen. Not a bargaining chip. Not even a sacrificial lamb.

Just a girl trying to get through the next few hours without her brain eating itself alive.

Milena smirks, adjusting my veil. “You know, your garter would be a *great* place to hide a flask…”

I snort. “Tempting. But no.”

She tilts her head. “Seriously, how’re you doing? I mean, mentally.”

I exhale slowly. “Like I’m about to do something huge and I have no idea if I’m ready?”

Milena grins. “Sounds about right.” She nudges my arm. “Just remember: you’re allowed to feel normal human emotions about a wedding.”

I roll my eyes. “I *am* feeling emotions. I just—can’t decide which ones yet.”

She smirks. “Bitch, that’s called being twenty-one.”

Before I can reply, the door bangs open.

Vera.

Wearing *white*.

Milena’s brows shoot up, her eyes dragging over my mother’s outfit, complete with lace roses and shawl.

“Is *that* what you’re wearing today, Mrs. Ostrova?”

Vera lifts her chin, smoothing a hand down the shimmering silk of her dress. “Of course.” There’s a trace of indignation in her voice, but mostly, there’s pride.

Milena and I exchange a *look*.

Vera steps further into the room, surveying me like a jeweler inspecting a gemstone. Her lips purse in thought, then curve into not-quite-a-smile. “You should be grateful. Most girls would kill to be in your position.”

I say nothing.

She exhales dramatically, the sound weighty with self-importance. “Meanwhile, I’m still rotting away in that *charming* Hell’s Kitchen apartment while you’re living in a goddamn Central Park mansion.”

She steps toward me, fingers tracing lightly over the beading on my gown. “Nice,” she murmurs. “Custom, I assume?”

I nod stiffly.

Vera turns to the mirror, humming as if she's the one being admired. "And to think, we barely used to scrape by." She flicks her gaze back to me, sharp and assessing. "Well?"

I frown. "Well…what?"

She exhales dramatically. "The *living situations*, Lyra. It's not a good look for you to be where you are while I'm still languishing in that moldy roach hotel. What are you going to do about it?"

I don't know how to answer that.

Vera tilts her head. "Don't play dumb, Lyra. You've never been good at it. What I'm saying is—*fix it*."

I swallow. "What do you think I should do?"

"I'm *sure* there's space somewhere in that—what, twenty-bedroom mansion for your dear mother?"

My brows knit. "I… I mean, I can ask Carmine—"

"Yes. Do that."

"I just don't know if he'll agree—"

Her smile is slow, condescending. "Then do what wives often do to get their way with their husbands, darling."

Milena makes a disgusted, gagging noise in the back of her throat.

I feel my skin crawl. "Absolutely *not*."

Vera rolls her eyes, smoothing the fabric of her gown like she's ending the conversation. "Well then," she mutters, picking imaginary lint from her sleeve. "Surely you can afford to ensure that your own mother doesn't have to live in squalor."

"Mom, I don't have any money—"

Vera scoffs. "Don't be ridiculous. You're marrying Carmine Barone."

I clench my jaw. "He's giving me a ring, not a credit card."

Her expression darkens, her voice taking on a sharper edge. “Ungrateful, as always.”

I grit my teeth. “That’s not—”

“Never could resist biting the hand that feeds you, could you?” she sneers. Her voice turns venomous. “Just like when you testified against your father. Such a *good little daughter* you were.”

The words land like a slap, knocking the breath from my lungs.

She presses on, her voice becoming more insidious. “After everything I did for you. After all the sacrifices I made. Keeping a roof over our heads, stretching every penny while you played at being a ballerina.”

My fingers tighten, twisting together.

Vera sighs, shaking her head. “And where did that leave me? Stuck. With. *You*.”

Her eyes glint cruelly as she leans in. “Don’t think for one second that this marriage makes you special, Lyra. You were chosen for convenience, nothing more.” She gestures broadly. “Do you think Carmine cares about you? Think he’s marrying you because you’re some great prize? Please.”

I stay silent. I know better than to let her see how much the words hurt.

Vera watches me, waiting for a reaction. When I don’t give her one, she exhales with a puff, exasperated. “What I mean is,—this isn’t just about you anymore. You have an obligation to people other than yourself now.”

Her voice is all honey and glass, deceptively sweet yet dangerously sharp. “Remember that.”

“That’s. Enough.”

The three of us startle, turning at the sound of the voice. Vito Barone steps inside, his mere presence shifting the air, diffusing the venom Vera has been spewing like a toxic cloud.

My mother straightens but doesn’t look ashamed.

Actually, I’m not sure she’s capable of that emotion.

Vito tilts his head, a pleasant smile curving his lips, but his eyes are sharp.

“I think we’re done here, Mrs. Ostrova, don’t you?”

Vera lifts her chin. “I beg your pardon. This is a private conversation.”

Vito sighs, like he’s dealing with a stubborn child. “Was,” he says sharply. “And now it’s over, and it’s time to go.”

The way he says it is even and without a trace of anger. But there’s still a power that resonates just under the surface, and I can tell even my mother feels it.

Vera hesitates, then flicks her gaze toward me. “You think this marriage will save you?” Her lips curl. “Stupid thing. You don’t even know what you’ve walked into.”

She turns on her heel and strides out. Two Barone men fall into step on either side of her.

Vito clears his throat, turning to smile kindly at Milena.

“Ms. Kalishnik, would you mind if I had a moment with my soon-to-be daughter-in-law?”

Milena glances at me. I nod quietly. “See you out there.”

She reaches over and squeezes my hand before she slips from the room.

Silence lingers.

I can't move. Can't breathe. I’m still reeling.

Vito sighs, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Weddings. They have a way of making people act out, don’t they?”

I laugh, but it’s forced.

Vito studies me for a moment. “I understand tough parents.” He sighs. “Trust me. My father was a tyrant.”

I glance at him, surprised by the warmth in his voice.

“You know, Lyra, I have a bit of a habit of taking in strays.”

A curious smile twists my lips. “Strays?”

“Dante. Bianca. Neither of them is mine. Well, you know that. But I raised them as my own. They’re family now.” He meets my gaze, serious. “After today, you are too. No matter what.”

My throat tightens. I blink rapidly, nodding. “Thank you,” I croak out quietly.

“You know,” he says chattily, “Carmine is a lot of things. Intense. Impulsive. Terrifying, when he wants to be.” His lips twist slightly, like he’s amusing himself. “But if nothing else, he’s loyal to the people he calls his own.”

I press my lips together, unsure how to respond. There’s something oddly comforting about Vito's manner—like he understands exactly what’s running through my head without me needing to say a word.

“Carmine fights for what’s his,” he continues, leaning back against the vanity. “Always has. He doesn’t do anything halfway. That goes for business, family, and…well, marriage.” He watches me closely. “He *chose* you, Lyra. And once Carmine decides something is his, he doesn’t let go."

That should probably unsettle me more than it does. Instead, I find myself nodding, rolling the weight of his words around in my head.

Vito smirks knowingly. “And if he steps out of line with you, you come tell me so I can straighten his ass out.”

That startles a laugh out of me, shaky but genuine. “I’ll keep that in mind, thanks.”

His smirk softens, becomes more sincere. “Look, I know my son. He’s not easy. He’s got more rough edges than he does soft spots. But he doesn’t abandon the people in his corner. You may not have planned for this, but you’re in that corner now.”

I swallow hard, my fingers twisting in my lap. It’s a strange feeling, being reassured by a man whose family I barely know or understand. But Vito’s words ease something tight in my chest that I hadn’t even realized was coiled there.

Vito rubs his jaw. “I was hoping I, ah, might ask a favor of you.”

I tilt my head. “Of course?”

He smiles, his eyes finding mine. “How would you feel if I walked you down the aisle?”

I hold his gaze, then nod firmly as I blink rapidly. “I think I’d like that very much,” I say quietly.

Vito grins, straightening his suit. “Good. Now, let’s go get you married.”

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LYRA

THE CHURCH FEELS SUFFOCATING: the dress too tight, the air too warm as I feel the weight of every pair of eyes crushing me, a physical pressure on my spine.

The priest speaks, but the words sound distant, like I'm underwater, barely able to puzzle out the shape of them. I focus on my breathing, on making sure my voice doesn't crack when it's my turn to speak.

"I do."

The words come out softer than I wanted, but they carry, ringing through the cavernous space.

Carmine's response is steady, unyielding. "I do."

His hand is warm when he takes mine, sliding the ring onto my finger.

The finality of it all sinks into my very bones, cold and inescapable.

The priest lifts his hands in a benediction. I barely hear him. The words blur together. Husband and wife. Bound together.

Forever.

Carmine's hand slides to the back of my head, fingers weaving into my hair, his grip not tender, not hesitant, but firm. Possessive. He leans in, and for a moment his lips are deceptively soft against mine. Then the pressure

increases, becomes punishing, sealing the moment with a brutality that sucks the air from my lungs.

His teeth clamp down on my lip, making me flinch when I feel him bite just hard enough to bring the taste of copper to my mouth.

Applause ripples through the crowd as he pulls back, his eyes glinting.

Crimson on his lips.

It barely registers. My world has just shifted on its axis.

And there's no turning back.

* * *

TODAY ISN'T JUST about the wedding. Actually, once we arrive at the Barone house, it feels like the wedding was only an appetizer.

The main event is Carmine's coronation.

The last time I was here, the house felt different—grand, intimidating, but still alive. There were people moving through the halls, voices and music, warmth cutting through the cold elegance. It all made the house feel like more than just a monument to power.

Now, as Carmine leads me inside, all of that is gone. The house feels empty, stripped of anything human. It's dark, quiet in a way that doesn't feel peaceful. The chandeliers overhead cast a golden glow, but it doesn't reach the corners. The walls feel closer, the air heavier.

It feels like a place where monumental things are decided. Not a home.

Or maybe the weird part is that this is *my* home now.

With Vito stepping down, and Carmine becoming don, the older Barone has moved to Dante and Bianca's estate in Long Island. Most of the time, they're at their place in the city anyway, so it suits everyone.

Out there, away from the weight of responsibility, Vito can do whatever he wants. And from what Bianca once told me with an exasperated laugh, in

addition to playing golf, smoking cigars, and listening to Sinatra full blast, that also includes sunbathing.

Nude.

So that leaves this house, and the seat of power it represents, with Carmine.

…And *me*, I suppose, since I've become the queen of a kingdom I never asked for.

Carmine leads me deeper into the house, past the grand staircase, past the ballroom. My face heats as his steps seem to slow just a bit as we pass by the guest bathroom where…

Yeah.

The night of the engagement party rushes back, tingling through my veins. Carmine's hand almost throbs against the small of my back. Then he ushers us forward.

The library doors loom ahead. Dark wood, intricately carved, practically black in the low light. Carmine pushes them open without a word, and the room devours us whole.

This is the heart of the Barone empire.

A small gathering awaits us. Nico, Dante and Tempest, Bianca with Kratos looming beside her. A handful of Vito's top lieutenants too, watching Carmine studiously, as well as a man I briefly met at the wedding—Santino, Vito's top *consigliere*.

Carmine's hand leaves my back. I glance to Bianca, who subtly gestures for me to join her.

The room falls silent as Vito steps forward to where Carmine is standing in the middle of the room.

"This is not a tradition of the Commission," Vito says, his voice low and reverent as he indicates an ancient-looking dagger in his hands. "It is a tradition of the Barone bloodline."

The blade gleams in the firelight.

“For generations, the men who have worn this crown have taken an oath to bleed for this family. To kill for it. To die for it.”

Carmine shrugs off his tuxedo jacket and removes his tie. He unbuttons his shirt, then peels it off his muscled shoulders.

I suck in my breath as Vito takes the blade and quickly slices a line across his own palm. Dark blood wells immediately.

Then he turns to Carmine.

Nico and Dante step forward, each taking one of Carmine’s arms, holding him steady. Nico hands his father a metal stencil with the design of a shield bearing a crown and sword. My face pales as I watch Nico grab his brother’s hand in his, squeezing tightly.

Vito’s voice is quieter now, something almost regretful slipping into its edges. “I’m truly sorry for what I must do, my son.”

Carmine just nods once.

Vito presses the stencil to the left side of Carmine’s bare chest, above his heart. Beside me, I feel Bianca slip her hand into mine, tightly.

Vito’s blade sinks into Carmine’s skin and begins to trace the design.

A sharp breath rushes from me, but Carmine doesn’t make a sound. Blood flows from the cut, running down his chest and abs in dark rivulets, staining the waistband of his pants.

Everyone in the room grimaces. Even Vito looks like he’s seconds away from stopping.

Carmine never flinches once.

When it’s over, Vito hands the blade and stencil to Santino, then turns back to his son with both pain and pride in his eyes.

“Carmine Barone, head of this house, the blade is yours. The blood is yours. The empire is yours.”

The men in the room bow their heads in silent recognition.

The king is dead. Long live the king.

I watch transfixed.

My husband.

The king.

I have no idea if I should kneel…or *run*.

* * *

AFTER THE GRUESOME RITUAL, the lieutenants hand around glasses of cognac. There's a toast to the new don, lots of clapping on shoulders, everyone apparently ignoring the fact that Carmine is still shirtless and *bleeding*.

But eventually everyone else disperses, their voices fading as they slip out of the library one by one. The air still hums with the weight of what just happened, of the vow he made, of the shift in power.

The heavy doors shut with a dull finality, locking me in place.

I'm finally alone with him.

Carmine exhales, slow and deep, rolling his shoulders, like he's shaking off the weight of his father's reign. The blood that drips from the carved emblem of the Barone crest is still bright and wet, but he stands there like the pain is nothing.

Then he looks at me.

And there's a dark shift in the air.

My throat tightens. I force myself to keep breathing, to keep my pulse steady even as it betrays me, hammering against my ribs.

"Do… Do you need a doctor?" I ask breathlessly. The words feel thin and useless.

He just shakes his head.

“Well?” His voice is smooth, deep, filling the silence between us.

I blink. “Well…what?”

“It’s time.”

My stomach tightens. “Time?”

He steps forward into my space, moving with a measured ease that makes my breath hitch. The flickering candlelight carves shadows along the sharp angles of his face, making him look even more intense.

“You do understand, Lyra…” His voice drops to a whisper as he lowers his face, his breath warm on my neck. “That as of today you’re *mine*.”

A shiver ripples through my core, pebbling my skin. Carmine chuckles, the sound sliding over my senses like silk and steel.

“I've been patient.”

His fingers drag over his fresh wound slowly before he lifts his bloodied hand and wraps it gently around my throat. The heat of his touch sears into my skin, branding. Possessing.

“But I’m done waiting.”

My breath stutters and I press my hands against his chest without thinking, feeling the slow, steady thrum of his heartbeat beneath my fingertips.

His grip stays light, more of a reminder than a threat. “Say you understand.”

His hand tightens around my throat. I don’t know if it's the heat of the room, the sight of the blood still wet on his chest, or just the emotional strain of the day, but when he does, the sound that drags from my chest can only be described one way:

Needy.

And I know he damn well heard it, too, because satisfaction flickers in his eyes.

Possession.

“Let’s try that again,” he growls. “Do you understand?”

This time I nod as my throat bobs against his hand.

“*I understand*,” I whisper.

Carmine smiles like a shark.

“Good. Because now, *wife*,” he murmurs, letting his hand slip wetly from my neck, his blood marking my skin, “it’s time for you to *run*.”

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19

LYRA

THE WORDS HANG in the air between us, thick and heavy, sinking into my skin like ink.

I don’t know if it’s a command or a challenge. Both, maybe.

I should laugh. I should scoff. I should roll my eyes and tell him he’s insane. But I don't do any of those.

“I—I don’t understand,” I whisper, though the pounding of my pulse betrays me.

Liar. I understand exactly what he means.

I’m just not sure I can admit it to myself.

Carmine smiles darkly. “Yes, you do. You’re going to run. And I’m going to chase you.” He steps right into my personal space, looming over me. “And then *catch you*.”

A dark, needy pull throbs inside me. I try to shove it down and ignore the heat curling in my belly, but it’s useless.

“What happens when you catch me?” I whisper, fear and something else I don’t want to name coursing through my veins.

His eyes gleam. His hand—the unbloodied one, thankfully—reaches up to cup my jaw. His thumb runs across my lips before it slips past them into my mouth.

I shiver as he presses down on my tongue, stroking it with his thumb as my lips automatically close around it. A dark grin curls his lips as he slowly eases his thumb in and out of my mouth.

“When I catch you,” he murmurs quietly, his voice curling around me like smoke. “I’m going to *fuck you*, little dancer.”

Holy shit.

A war rages within me. My rational mind screams that this is wrong, that I should be disgusted, that I should run and never look back. But the dark, twisted part of me—the part Carmine sees *so clearly*—wants to see how far he’ll go. How far I’ll let him.

I try to tell myself that it's *wrong* for me to want this, get excited about it. This isn't normal. My depraved, immoral desires that Carmine so easily sinks his claws into *aren't normal*.

They're still there, though, lurking under the surface. It’s like he can smell them.

Can I really lose my virginity like this?

Carmine tilts his head, almost like he can hear the battle in my mind. “You can run,” he growls, tracing his thumb over my lower lip again. “Or not, and I’ll simply take you right here. But if you run, you can at least tell yourself you tried to get away.”

A single second stretches between us like an eternity. Then, before I can second-guess myself—

I whirl, and I bolt.

My feet pound the marble floors as I tear through the library and out the door, my wedding dress a tangle of silk and lace around my legs. My breath comes fast and sharp, every inhalation searing my lungs.

Behind me, there’s no frantic pursuit.

Just slow, measured steps.

A predator in no hurry to end the hunt.

I don’t look back. I can’t.

I round a corner sharply, my fingers grazing the wall for balance. The branching hallways stretch before me, dim and endless, lined with tall doors and gilded mirrors that reflect my panicky expression back at me.

I need to hide.

Another turn. My wedding dress catches on the corner of a table, yanking me back. I let out a sharp gasp and wrench free, the beautiful, delicate lace tearing as I stumble forward.

There’s a whisper of movement behind me.

A hand grabs my waist.

I shriek, twisting, slapping vainly at the iron grip that holds me. But Carmine is stronger, faster. His fingers dig into my hip as he spins me around, slamming me against the wall.

My chest is heaving. His lips curve in amusement, dark eyes gleaming. “Too slow, little dancer.”

I bring my knee up, aiming for his balls, but he dodges at the last second and I catch his thigh instead. He grunts, his grip loosening.

I wrench away and *run*.

The hallway twists ahead of me, a staircase looming at the end.

I take the steps two at a time, my dress a torn ruin, my breath ragged, my muscles screaming.

A hand wraps around my ankle like iron.

I let out a strangled cry as I’m pulled back, my kneecap banging over the steps as Carmine drags me down, pain and adrenaline tangling in my veins. I twist, kicking, clawing.

My body slams down the stairs with bruising force. My vision blurs from the impact, my breath stuttering as Carmine is suddenly over me, pinning me to the floor with his weight. His grip is firm, his body pressing into mine just enough to remind me how much bigger and stronger he is. One hand is

on my chest, the other shoving my dress up, his fingers curling around the fabric possessively.

“Caught you,” he murmurs, dark satisfaction in his voice.

Hot, wild rage sparks inside me. I slap him hard across the face, my palm cracking against his cheek. His head snaps to the side from the impact.

For a long breath, nothing moves.

“Feral little thing, aren't you,” he murmurs.

His palm collides with my cheek, sending a searing jolt through me.

It should enrage me. But instead heat surges in its wake, my breath ragged from the vicious thrill of it.

I don’t stop to think. I claw at him, nails raking over his chest and over the still-bleeding wound. He growls, his grip loosening just enough.

I tear myself free, scrambling to my feet, my dress torn and bloody from where his cut smeared against me. My muscles scream in protest, but I run.

Blindly.

I don’t know where I’m going, only that I need to put as much distance between us as possible. The mansion stretches out in an unfamiliar maze, doors and corridors blurring as I surge forward.

A second staircase looms. Without thinking, I take it, hurtling down the steps in a desperate bid for freedom.

I shove open the doors at the bottom and stagger down the hall, through a set of double doors into—

The fucking library.

The fire still crackling in the hearth. The room is exactly as I left it.

I whirl, chest heaving as I head for the opposite door—

I never make it.

Carmine grabs me from behind, his arms around me like steel. I thrash, trying to twist free, but his grip is unrelenting.

I crash to the floor with a choked gasp, the force knocking the breath from my lungs.

Carmine is on me in an instant, pinning me face-down, his hands caging me in, his breath hot against my cheek.

“You tried, little dancer,” he murmurs darkly. “But we both knew how this would end.”

I claw at the thick rug beneath me, trying to push myself up. But Carmine is still pressing me down, his weight unyielding, his body locking me in place, daring me to keep fighting.

Which I do.

Still face-down, I jerk violently, kicking out, trying to catch his ribs, his legs, anything. I reach back, my nails scraping at his arms. It only seems to amuse him. He catches one of my wrists, then the other, yanking them behind my back and pinning them together with one brutal hand.

“Still fighting?” he breathes savagely. “That’s good. Keep fighting.”

He leans down, his lips by my ear.

“*I like it when you fight me.*”

His free hand skims over my back, his fingers taking hold of the shredded bodice of my dress before ripping the last of it away, the sound sharp and final in the quiet of the library. I feel air against my bare skin, bucking beneath him, and he lets out a low, approving growl.

I jerk my head back, trying to catch him off guard, but he’s already anticipated the move and shifted his grip. His fingers tangle in my hair and he yanks, arching my neck even more. His teeth scrape my jaw, the bite just shy of painful, sending a white-hot bolt of something forbidden down my spine.

“Let me go,” I pant, struggling in his iron grip.

Carmine chuckles. “No.”

I twist again, this time managing to throw him off balance. His grip loosens for a fraction of a second, and I seize my chance. I wrench myself free, shoving up onto my hands and knees, scrambling forward—

He’s faster.

I don’t make it two feet before his arms lock around my waist and he slams me back to the ground again. The breath leaves my lungs in a rush as he pins me down, his hands gripping my wrists, his weight heavy on me.

My chest heaves, my skin burning where his fingers dig into my flesh. I cry out when he grabs a fist of my hair, twisting my head around, forcing me to look at him. He’s breathing hard too, his lips parted, his pupils dilated.

“Where exactly do you think you’re going?” he murmurs, his breath fanning against my cheek. “You're lying to yourself, little dancer. You keep running, but you don’t *really* want to get away…do you.”

He doesn’t wait for a response. He lets go of one of my wrists and grabs a fistful of my ripped wedding gown. He yanks it up over my bare thighs, then up to my waist.

Suddenly, I feel the sharp crack of his palm slapping my ass. I let out a strangled sound, a mix of fury and something far more dangerous.

Needy. Wild. Explosive, and *wrong*.

I shove at the floor, trying to gain some space, but it only makes him push harder, his hips pressing into mine, his fingers going to my wrists again.

“Go on,” he taunts. “*Fight me*.”

I do. I twist. I claw. I kick one of my heels up and back, barely missing the vulnerable space between his legs. He lets out a savage cry, catching my leg, forcing it back down.

His mouth is at my throat again, his teeth scraping my skin, his breath hot and uneven. “Who knew I’d married such an *eager little fuck toy*,” he snarls into my neck.

I shake my head, gasping as his teeth sink in harder, not quite breaking the skin, yet marking, claiming.

“I *am not*,” I seethe. Even as I say it, my body betrays me, arching into him, my pulse hammering against his lips.

Carmine’s gaze is scorching as it meets mine. “*Liar*.”

His palm crashes against the soft skin of my ass again, bringing a cry to my lips and a shiver to my core. I tremble, writhing under him, my pulse spiking when I feel him suddenly grab the back of my thong.

Oh fuck…

I bite back a moan as he tugs, forcing it tighter between my legs. The sweet friction of the lace against my clit has my chest hitching and my pulse skipping as wetness soaks the fabric. Carmine growls, tugging on the thong again before suddenly, his muscles jerk.

I cry out when I feel the lace tear away from me. I can feel it dragging over my slickness before my eyes suddenly bulge when he shoves it against my lips. I open my mouth to cry out, and he stuffs my ruined panties into it.

Then I hear the jangle of his belt.

The tug of his zipper.

Then the hot, throbbing, *huge* feeling of his thick cock, heavy and swollen against my ass.

“Mmm, *fuck*,” Carmine groans, stroking his dick against my ass and rolling his hips slowly, savoring the sensation. “You’re shaking, baby. Is that from fear, or because you already know you’re going to let me break you apart and put you back together again—over and over…"

A low whimper has drool soaking into my panties as I feel him ease the fat, swollen head of his cock between my legs. He shoves a knee between them, prying them wider apart.

His cock runs over my pussy lips.

“You’re so fucking wet for me, baby. You’re dripping and desperate, like you *need* my cock inside you more than you need to breathe."

I hate how right he is. I should be afraid. I *am* afraid. But fear and pleasure are starting to feel the same.

His strength terrifies me. His control *undoes* me. I tell myself this is wrong, that I should be fighting harder—but my body betrays me again.

I hate how much I need him to take me, to ruin me, to make me his.

"This is mine now,” he growls.

I whimper, my body tightening up as I feel his thick head push between my lips, right at my opening.

“This tight, dripping little cunt belongs to *me*, and I’m going to fuck it like it’s the only thing I need to survive. So be a good girl, Lyra,” he growls, leaning over me, his hand grabbing a fistful of my hair as his hips tense. “*And take every inch of me like a good little cock slut.*”

He rams through my virginity with one brutal thrust, and even gagged, my scream rips down the walls.

At first, all I know is the pain tearing into me. The sheer ruthlessness of it sucks the air from my lungs and sends my head reeling. But as that first abrupt feeling of penetration recedes, another sensation takes its place.

Wild.

Unhinged and untethered.

It has me whimpering into the panties stuffed between my lips, my body coiling and writhing as I adjust to the sheer size of him.

It hurts. *God*, it hurts. But somewhere behind the ache, the raw stretch of him inside me, pleasure ignites, deep and needy. My body shouldn’t crave this, shouldn’t *welcome* this, but the moment pain melts into heat, there’s no turning back.

His teeth sink sharply into my throat, and the sting sends a wicked, molten pulse straight between my legs. The agony of him stretching me open

morphs into something I *need*—I'd beg for it if I wasn't gagged.

Carmine saws out of me, and I cry out into the lace as I feel my lips clinging to him so needily. He fucks into me again, his hips and abs slapping loudly against my ass as he thrusts deep. His hands keep me right where I am, one twisted in my hair, the other possessively on my hip by my torn wedding dress.

Every ruthless, bruising thrust should break me. Leave me in ruins. But all it does is drive me closer to the edge, to that sharp, unbearable bliss.

Pleasure is pain. Pain is pleasure. And somewhere between the two, I *break*—and never want to be put back together again.

"You're taking me so fucking deep, baby," he growls in my ear as he leans over me, his hips rolling as he buries his fat cock inside me over and over. "Like you want every inch of my cock in you forever."

His palm slaps my ass again, sending heat exploding over my skin before the same hand quickly snakes underneath me. His fingers pinch and roll my clit, and I cry out as my body violently squirms and twists against him.

"Feel that?" he groans into my ear. "How fucking *tight* you are around me? Your cunt knows I own it now. It *likes* being used by me."

His teeth graze my earlobe before he suddenly bites down, hard.

"So wet for me. So fucking greedy. You can fight all you want, but this perfect little pussy is *begging* to be wrecked."

Carmine groans loudly in pleasure, not holding anything back. His hips crash into mine, his fingers still underneath me, rubbing my clit mercilessly as he fucks me into the floor. My torn wedding dress slips off me, and my bare, aching nipples drag electrically against the carpet as Carmine's thick cock pounds into me.

My reality begins to blur. The harder and rougher he is, the deeper I sink into my own depravity. The more he brutalizes me, the more the pressure builds, until I realize there's nothing on this fucking Earth that will stop the release that's about to explode through me.

"You’re going to come all over my big dick, aren’t you? So fucking desperate for cock you don’t even care how rough I am."

Slam.

He rails into me, forcing the breath from my lungs as my eyes roll back.

"There’s no escape, Lyra. No running now. You belong here—under me, pussy stretched around my cock, screaming my name. Don’t you dare close your legs. Keep them wide open and take it like a *good girl*."

Slam.

Drool soaks the panties stuffed between my lips. My legs begin to shake. Explosive fire catches deep in my core, spreading like napalm through my veins as my whole world shifts on its axis.

"I told you I’d break you. And now you’re going to thank me for it by having that pretty little cunt squeeze every drop out of me. Be a good girl and fucking come for me, baby.”

His hips ram into me, punctuating every word.

“Come. For. Me. Right. Fucking. *NOW*.”

The pleasure is coiled so unbearably tight that when it snaps, it’s not a release—it’s an obliteration. My entire body shatters, breaking apart and reforming around the pulsing, insane ecstasy that consumes me whole.

The orgasm slams through me so hard my vision blurs. Every muscle seizes around him, milking the cum from him, demanding more and more even as pleasure detonates inside me, stealing my breath.

It’s almost too much—too strong, too intense—and I sob through it, my body convulsing as he drives me over the edge again and again. My body clenches around him like it never wants to let go, every scrap of pleasure tightening, squeezing, wrecking me completely.

With a loud, roaring cry, Carmine buries himself inside me. His cock throbs and twitches, and I melt when I feel the powerful ropes of hot cum spill into me, pumping me so full that I can feel it leaking out from where we join.

I can feel his touch everywhere—his teeth on my throat, his fingers in my skin, the weight of his thick cock inside me.

I should feel shame.

But all I feel is *his*—wrecked, taken, consumed by the man who just broke me open and put me back together.

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CARMINE

I DON'T SLEEP.

I should.

I should be able to close my eyes and sink into the dreamless oblivion that always comes after I've taken what I need.

Because tonight I took everything.

My throne. My kingdom. My *wife*.

Lyra is sprawled across the chaise lounge: naked, exhausted. Her skin glows in the light of the dying fire, her limbs tangled in what's left of her torn dress: its vain attempt to stay on her is almost comical.

Her skin is marred with the evidence of what I did to her. There's blood—between her thighs, streaked across the shredded silk of her gown, on other expanses of her skin, where the sigil carved into my flesh rubbed her.

My ring glints on her finger mockingly.

She belongs to me now.

I watch her for a long time, my gaze dragging over the curve of her shoulder, the bruises already blooming on her thighs, the faint teeth marks on her skin. Seeing her like this—open, vulnerable—makes my blood stir again. A familiar pull deep in my gut, dark and relentless.

But this time, it isn't just hunger.

It’s something else, that I refuse to name.

On the floor, like a satiated animal, I lean back against the chair across from her, allowing my breath to return to normal. The fire casts flickering shadows over the room, painting her body in shades of gold and crimson. Her chest rises and falls steadily. She's completely unaware of the weight of my stare.

I should be done with her. That’s how this works.

I never do repeats. Never fuck the same woman twice, not ever. Sex is a mere function, a necessary catharsis to keep the deeply violent urges in check. A release, nothing more.

Lyra is…different.

The first time wasn’t enough. Even the second time didn’t take the edge off. She’s still in my head, in my blood, coiling through me like a sickness I don’t know how to cure.

My fingers flex, digging into the carpet. I should feel satisfied. I should feel like a man who has taken everything he wanted, leaving nothing behind.

Instead, I feel restless.

I stand, crossing the room slowly. The wooden floor creaks, but she doesn’t stir—not even when I crouch beside her, close enough to feel the warmth radiating off her skin.

My hand hovers over her thigh. I don’t touch her, but the temptation is there, gnawing, whispering in my ear.

Mark her again.

But for once, I hesitate. Because this time, I don’t just want to take.

I want to *keep*.

The thought is foreign to me. I am not a man who keeps things. I take, I use, I discard. That has always been enough.

But watching her now, in the aftermath of what I’ve done, a strange feeling inside me tightens, coiled low and deep and unfamiliar.

I’ve never cared about being feared. I’ve never cared what people whisper about me.

I *am* a monster, and I have never once lost sleep over it.

My eyes drag over her sleeping form.

I should take her to bed.

That would be the rational thing to do. It’s sure as fuck not chivalry. It just seems like the sensible thing to do, not to leave a naked girl sprawled across the chaise lounge of my library.

Especially not one who is *my fucking wife*.

But I don’t move. I can’t.

I’m too enraptured by the sight of her, spread across the chaise like an offering, her skin marked with the signs of my claim. The dim firelight highlights every angry raised bruise, every sharp bite, every place where my hands and mouth have been and conquered. My stomach clenches as I look, heat curling low in my gut.

I kneel beside her, fingers trailing up her thigh, ghosting over the marks I left. The moment my fingertips skim the tender flesh, she shifts slightly, a soft breath catching in her throat. I smirk darkly.

Even asleep, her body remembers me.

I palm her hip, fingers sinking into the soft flesh, feeling the warmth of her beneath my hand. This is what true ownership looks like—her bare, ruined body, branded, resting where I left her.

Hunger surges again, sharp and unrelenting. I shouldn’t. But then, have I ever been a man who denies himself?

Slowly, deliberately, I spread her legs.

She murmurs softly in her sleep, body pliant. I press a kiss to the inside of her thigh, my lips dragging over her heated skin, enjoying the way her breath catches.

I move higher, pushing her thighs wider apart to reveal her pretty pink pussy.

Fuuccck.

It's still swollen and tender from my cock breaking through her virginity and making her mine. There’s still evidence of that on her inner thigh—a bit of dried blood to go with the pinkness of her lips and the bruises on her hips and thighs.

Some of my cum is still dripping out of her.

My cock hardens as I lean in and slowly, deliberately, drag my tongue up her pussy.

Fuck, she tastes good.

Lyra whimpers softly in her sleep, shifting slightly as my tongue soothes the ache my dick left behind. I lick up her lingering arousal, my cum, her blood—the mix of our flavors swirling on my tongue as I push deep to get every drop of her.

I take my time, lapping over the sensitive flesh, my hands gripping her thighs, keeping them apart as I devour her.

Lyra writhes, her head tilting side to side, a quiet whine dropping from her lips. She doesn’t wake, but her body responds, her hips shifting toward my mouth as her breathing grows more erratic. I don’t stop or ease up. I work her with my tongue, my fingers slipping inside her, coaxing her higher and higher until she’s trembling beneath me.

And then, with a soft whimper, she shatters.

A choked moan escapes her, body arching, hands fisting the cushions of the chaise even as she sleeps. I watch, mesmerized, as she falls apart for me, pleasure written on every inch of her body.

After the tremors subside and her body finally stills, I wipe my mouth against the inside of her thigh and slide up onto the chaise beside her. I tuck myself against her, my arm draped over her waist possessively, my face

buried in her hair. I don’t know why. Maybe her warmth, her softness, the way she feels like she belongs here, pressed to me.

Her breathing is steady, slow.

But just as I start to drift, I hear it.

A whisper in the silence.

I almost don’t catch it. But then I lean over her, turning my head so that my ear is near her lips as they murmur again.

“*You’re a monster*.”

My body goes still, my fingers freezing against her skin.

“*How do you live with yourself?*”

My breath dies in my throat.

For the first time in years—maybe my entire life—I feel cold.

It shouldn’t matter. I’ve been called worse. And I’ve truly never once cared. Never even *flinched*.

But this?

My hand retreats from her skin like I’ve been burned.

I stare at her, searching her face for an explanation. But she’s still lost in sleep.

My jaw clenches. My stomach twists, an unfamiliar sensation clawing at my insides.

I stand abruptly. The need to be anywhere but here grips me, pressing frantically on my ribs.

Then I’m gone.

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CARMINE

THE NUMBERS on the page in front of me blur. I stare at them, willing my brain to process the percentages and projections laid out there in precise detail. But my mind drifts.

You're a monster.

My fingers tighten around the leather armrests of my chair, the memory of her whispered words sinking into my bones. I have been called *far* worse—by enemies, by men begging for their lives before I put a bullet in their brain.

It shouldn't matter.

…It does.

There's no knock before the door swings open. Only one person other than my father would dare enter uninvited.

Sure enough, Nico strides in, relaxed as ever, dropping into the chair across from my desk with his long legs stretched out and a smug expression on his face.

I exhale slowly, dragging my eyes up to him. "Please, *do* come in, brother. Make yourself comfortable."

"Fuck." He grins. "It was great enough being the son of the don. But the brother? That sounds even better. All of the perks, *none* of the responsibilities."

I glare at him. “What the fuck makes you think there won’t be any responsibilities?”

Nico grins. “Second-born, baby.” He winks at me. “I told Bianca years ago that she and I were in the clear with getting pressured into marriage. Then she had to go and fire-bomb Kratos’ car.” He sighs dramatically. “But me, I’ve managed to keep my pyro tendencies in check. Ergo, no forced marriage for yours truly.”

“Just think of all the seven-foot tall Greek men you’ll never meet with that mentality,” I grunt back.

My brother chuckles. “You know, I’ve never been with a Greek girl—at least, I don’t think so. Pity Kratos’ sister Callie is married—”

“Is there a *point* to this visit, Nico?” I grunt. “Believe me, I’m *overjoyed*”—I draw the word out sarcastically—"that your life seems to be so free and easy. Mine is the fucking opposite.”

I turn to glare at the mountain of financial statements on the desk. This isn’t even half of them. Santino, the fucking adding machine that he is, is currently in the weird little office he’s had in the basement of this house since I was six, looking at the lion's share of the Barone empire reports.

Nico spreads his arms, then kicks his feet up and rests them on the edge of the desk. I level a withering stare at him.

“What?” He smiles in amusement. “You *did* tell me to get comfortable.”

“You’re going to learn to get comfortable with just stumps below the shins if you don’t get your goddamn feet off my desk, fucker.”

He chuckles, but at least he takes his feet down.

“I just wanted to stop by and see how my newlywed brother the don is doing.”

I spread my arms, gesturing broadly with a dark look on my face.

“I see,” Nico frowns. “So—lonely at the top. No rest for the wicked. It’s a long way to the top if you wanna rock and roll. All of the above?”

“All of the above,” I sigh.

“Well,” Nico clears his throat. “You can’t be in *that* bad of a mood.”

I glare at him. “And why would you say that?”

“Probably the ripped pair of panties under the chaise over there.”

I almost don’t look, in case he’s bullshitting me and just trying to get a reaction. Then my eyes dart over anyway, and a shadow crosses my face.

Fuck.

My little brother snickers quietly as I stand, march over, and pluck the torn thong from the floor, stuffing it into my pocket before I walk back over to my desk and sit again.

“Go ahead,” he sighs. “Tell me it’s not what I think.”

“Nah, it’s probably exactly what you think,” I say dryly.

Nico arches a brow. “Interesting. For a guy who got laid last night, you’re still doing that thing.”

“What *thing*?” My voice is ice.

“That thing where you’re too controlled.” He gestures lazily with his fingers. “Like you’re about to snap someone’s neck.”

I lift a brow. “Maybe I am.”

He grins. “Sweet, I *like* this game. Who’s the lucky fucker?”

“The next asshole who puts their feet on my goddamn desk, that’s who.”

Nico sits up slightly, his smirk fading just a little. He watches me like one predator sizing up another.

“This mood of yours have anything to with your new wife?”

My spine stiffens.

“Watch it,” I warn.

Nico exhales a quiet chuckle, his gaze sharpening. “Aha. So it *does*.”

I don’t confirm or deny it. I don’t need to.

Silence stretches between us, taut like a wire. Nico may be fire where I am ice, but we share the same predatory edge. He *knows* me. Always has.

“What did she do?” he asks eventually. “Have the gall to speak in your presence? Did she stand up too straight?” He winces. “Fuck, Carmy. Don’t tell me she had an *opinion*.”

I roll my eyes. “*Surely* you have things to do other that busting my balls.”

“You’d think so…” He shrugs. “But honestly? My schedule's pretty clear. Well, aside from your balls.”

I shoot him a glare. “I can easily adjust that schedule for you.”

He rolls his neck, smirking as he leans back in the chair. “Actually, I did come here to talk business.” He frowns. “Territory dispute. Jimmy Morelli’s crew keeps pushing the line where his territory butts up against Ezio Adamos’. And as you know, Ezio reports directly to—”

“Ares Drakos,” I grunt.

My sister’s brother-in-law.

The Drakos family and mine don’t have any official treaties or anything. But we’ve done some business together, and we’re obviously on friendly enough terms, given that Bianca's married to Kratos.

Unfortunately, it's an amicable relationship that Jimmy fucking Morelli seems to be hell-bent on stepping all over.

A decision that now gets to be my fucking job to clean up.

“What the fuck is his problem?”

“From what I remember about him in high school?” Nico shrugs. “Cocaine, anger management issues, and an IQ that's only in the double digits.”

I grit my teeth. Nepotism is basically how the entire underworld works: if you’re a crime boss, nine times out of ten, your successor is your kid. Even if, as in Chris Morelli’s case, your kid's a fucking idiot.

“Okay, let’s do this. Grab Santino, maybe Tony Gallo, and Giovanni Conti. Head down to that bar that Jimmy operates out of. Have a talk with him, casually mention that I’ll personally blow his balls off with a shotgun if he keeps pissing over the fence onto Ezio’s territory.”

Nico’s brow arches. “You want me to bring *Gio*? He’s insane, you know. He makes Jimmy look like a rational, compassionate guy.”

I smile coldly. “Exactly.”

My brother shakes his head. “You’re the boss, boss.” He frowns, sucking on his teeth before he drags his gaze back to me. “There’s actually…another reason I wanted to swing by today.”

“Oh?”

He nods. “Kir is making moves.”

My gaze narrows. “Explain.”

Nico shifts, stretching like a cat before sitting forward, his elbows on his knees. His face shadows, his voice lowering, even though the only other people in the house right now are Santino in his basement dungeon lair…

…And my new bride, who managed to find her way up to one of the guest rooms at some point last night and has stayed there ever since.

“Kir’s waging a campaign,” Nico growls quietly, “against *us*.”

A long silence stretches out.

He doesn’t mean the Barone family.

He means the *other* us.

Nico’s eyes glint. “He wants to wage a war against the Court.”

I glare at my brother. “We don’t talk about that outside of it,” I say, voice flat.

Nico frowns. “Relax, Carmy.” He leans forward, voice dropping to a whisper only I can hear. “It’s just us.”

It doesn’t matter. Outside the Court, it doesn’t exist. It’s a phantom organization, a legend whispered in the dark.

“You know the fucking rules,” I growl quietly.

Nico exhales. “Yeah, I do. But this is important.”

I pause for a moment. “Fine. What’s going on with Kir?”

“He’s never been shy about voicing his distaste for the Court. But now he’s rallying others to join him and actually *do* something about it.”

I stay silent, waiting for more.

“Kir doesn’t approve of vigilantes,” Nico continues. “He likes order and structure. He thinks power should lie with the major players who built this world.” Nico lifts a brow. “The Commission, the Iron Table, the High Council—*not* some faceless group meting out justice from the shadows.”

I exhale slowly. Kir has never been a man who tolerates disruptions to the balance of power. He’s completely unafraid to pull strings or cut throats when necessary, but he does it *within* the system of the underworld as it exists now. He believes in hierarchy, stability, and above all else, the control of the established families *staying* with the established families.

And the Black Court doesn't play by those rules.

“He wants to form a bloc,” Nico adds, watching me carefully. “He’s reaching out to other leaders, pushing the idea that *we* are the real threat.”

I sit back, my fingers flexing against the desk. “Who has he approached?”

My brother shakes his head. “No one from the Commission, I know that much. Not yet, anyway. He’s starting small—leaning on old allies, whispering in the right ears. But if he gets enough backing and makes this into a real movement…” Nico trails off, letting the thought dangle.

It doesn’t need to be said: if Kir convinces enough people that the Black Court is a threat, he’ll be able to take his campaign further and bring it to the very people we *can’t* afford to have looking too closely.

“He’s playing a long game,” I say finally.

Nico nods. “And as we all know, he’s very good at that.”

The room is quiet for a minute.

“It's not that he disagrees with *what* we do,” I muse. “Just *how* we do it.”

“Exactly.”

I exhale slowly. This changes things. Kir isn’t just a rival keeping tabs on us anymore, waiting for an opportunity to strike. Now, he’s actively working *against* us.

I hold his gaze for a moment longer before nodding. “Keep me updated.”

Nico grins. “Wouldn’t dream of doing anything else.”

Then, as easily as he entered, he pushes up from the chair and strolls toward the door, the tension in the room melting, his tone becoming light, almost amused.

“Hey, where’s your wifey by the way? Or should I just assume she’s out buying new underwear?”

He only barely dodges the book I hurl at his head.

It’s only after Nico’s gone that I let out a slow breath, my fingers tapping on the desk.

Kir is making moves, has the Black Court in his sights. If he rallies enough support…if he learns who we are…

No. That’s not going to happen.

I turn back to my desk, picking up the report I never finished reading. My eyes skim the numbers, but they still don’t register.

Because the second I try to focus, I hear it again.

You’re a monster.

Lyra’s voice cuts through my thoughts like a blade, sharper than Kir’s threats, more disquieting than any war brewing outside these walls.

I exhale, staring at the desk in front of me. My fingers tighten slightly.

I tell myself it doesn't matter. That I don’t care.

But the way my jaw clenches, and my stomach twists…

I think I do.

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22

LYRA

I WAKE with a choked cry withering in my throat, my pulse punching at my veins.

Fuck.

It’s the same dream I’ve been having almost nightly for the last few weeks. No, not dream.

Nightmare.

It always starts the same. I’m back in that sub-basement, in the shadows of horror, my bare feet sticky with blood, my ears ringing with the sound of screams.

Chains rattle in the distance. A girl’s voice sobs and pleads.

And *he* looms in front of me.

Arkadi.

His hands are covered in blood, and his eyes flicker in the dim light; hungry and cold.

“*You’re a monster*,” I whisper, my voice hoarse, barely audible over the screams.

Arkadi tilts his head, his eyes narrowing with amusement. "But you’re my daughter," His voice is soft, almost pitying. "You'll always be of my blood."

My body locks up, nausea curling in my gut. I take a step back. He takes one forward.

“You’re a monster,” I repeat, louder, the words feeling like broken glass on my tongue.

Arkadi grins, flashing his teeth like a wolf. "So what does that make *you*?"

The blood at my feet grows deeper, creeping up my legs like it’s going to drown me.

Then—the dream shifts.

The room is the same, but Arkadi is gone.

And standing in front of me is Vera.

Her lipstick is smudged, her eyes sharp and cold. There’s blood all over her hands.

She exhales smoke, flicking her cigarette into the knee-deep blood on the flood. "You put your own father away."

My pulse roars in my ears.

She tilts her head, studying me. "How do you live with yourself?"

Back in my bed, I ball my fists up and rub my eyes, trying to eradicate the lingering tremors and shudders of that nightmare.

I exhale slowly, trying to breathe it out and away from me as I let consciousness drag me into the day.

It’s been two days since the wedding.

Since Carmine chased me through the house like a wild beast pursuing prey.

Since I lost my virginity in a way that should have broken me, but instead left something tangled and burning deep inside my chest.

My things from my apartment arrived yesterday, neatly packed and then unpacked by unseen hands. My life has been folded into this house. *His* house. It doesn’t feel like mine.

I haven’t hung up most of my clothes. The closet in the guest room I’ve claimed is half-empty, suitcases still ranged along the wall like I’m waiting…hoping…for someone to tell me I can leave.

Carmine himself has been a ghost.

I barely see or hear him. He’s here in the house, I know that. But it’s like he’s deliberately avoiding me; like his absence is so complete that it feels planned. From so hot it burned me to ice cold. From one thousand miles an hour with a jet engine strapped to my back to a complete, dead stop. It's strange.

And the worst part is, it *bothers* me.

I should be relieved. I should be grateful for the space, for the break from his suffocating presence, the way he gets under my skin and past my defenses.

For some respite from his consuming, toxic, predatory grasp.

I’m not.

I can’t shake the feeling that the withdrawal is too precise, too calculated—like he’s watching from the shadows, waiting. Testing me.

I tell myself not to care. That it doesn’t matter.

But the more I tell myself that, the more it feels like a lie.

* * *

“So does that mean you’re not a virgin anymore?”

I freeze, my face heating.

For the million-and-first time, I find myself supremely regretting the night I got *way* too drunk and let it slip—to *Vaughn*, of all fucking people—that I was still a virgin at twenty-one.

Until two nights ago…

Instantly, Naomi, Milena, and Brooklyn, who were stretching next to Vaughn on stage, cluster around.

“What are you talking about?” I mumble, unzipping my coat.

“Just the massive fucking *bite mark*—or whatever the fuck part of his anatomy did that to *your* anatomy—on your neck.” Vaughn grins salaciously, jabbing a finger at the side of my throat.

“Oh my *God*,” I mutter under my breath. “I hate you.”

Vaughn—absolute *menace* that he is—grins, exposing the sin on my skin. “Come on. Answer the question, Mrs. Mafia Bride.”

“The answer is mind your own damn business,” I snap. “And don’t call me that.”

Vaughn lifts a single brow. “Yeah—I truly cannot believe we’ve hit a point in our lives where I’m saying this, but my business isn’t *nearly* as exciting as yours. I hope we can all appreciate the gravity of this moment.”

He successfully yanks my jacket all the way off and tosses it aside. Instantly, their mouths all drop open.

“*Girl*,” Brooklyn chokes out, her eyebrows practically on the ceiling. I cringe under their stares, painfully aware of the bruises all over my arms, cleavage, and neck.

That’s just the ones they can *see*.

The ones on my inner thighs, my breasts, my ass? Those throb even deeper and are already an even angrier shade of purple and black.

Because I married a wild animal, apparently.

A feral hound…

Milena intervenes before Vaughn can say anything else. “Shut the fuck up, Vaughn,” she sighs, shoving him back and turning to me. Her face grows serious. “Are you okay? Those bruises are serious.”

Vaughn snorts. “Yeah, because someone got seriously *fuuucked* on her wedding night.”

Naomi, bless her, huffs and crosses her arms. “Don't be a perv, Vaughn. She obviously bumped into something.” She turns to me, determined. “Right?”

Oh boy.

Vaughn roars with laughter. Milena can barely hide the grin on her lips. And Brooklyn giggles as she turns to our eternally innocent friend. “Oh, you sweet, sweet summer child.”

Naomi frowns. “What?”

Milena smirks. “Well, Naomi, sometimes two consenting adults have the urge to get a little rough in the bedroom—”

Naomi gasps, her face turning a shade of red I didn’t even know existed. “Oh my *God*,” she squeaks.

Milena turns back to arch a brow at me. “Soooo… Married life is going well, I see.”

I groan again. “I *hate* you all.”

“No, you *love* us,” Brooklyn corrects. “But seriously. How’s it feel, being a Barone?”

I roll my eyes. “Can we please talk about literally anything else? What about you guys? Anything new?”

Milena flashes me a look. “In the last forty-eight hours? *Nope.*”

Brooklyn taps her chin, pretending to think. “Hmm…let’s see… No, I didn’t marry a *mafia don* lately, so I think that’s still the most interesting thing in the room.”

I groan. “You’re impossible.”

Milena laughs and loops an arm around my shoulders. “Okay, enough. We’re glad you’re here, even if you are Mrs. Mafia now.”

Brooklyn pouts dramatically. “Still waiting for *my* tall, dark and dangerous.”

Vaughn shrugs. “Just say the word, baby girl. I’ll put together a foolproof dating strategy for you.”

Brooklyn makes a face. “Hard pass. I’ve seen the skanks and fuckbois you bring home.”

“Well, *somebody’s* gotta keep the city's emotionally unavailable bartenders and aspiring actresses with daddy issues entertained.”

Laughter echoes around the vast space, and for the first time in days, I feel lighter.

The side door to the theater swings open, and Evelina strides in, her bright pink…because of course it is…duffel bag slung over her shoulder. Behind her, looming in the doorway, are two tall, built, figures—her brother, Roman, and Bane Antonov.

Roman's dark hair is slightly tousled as his gray eyes sweep over the room like he’s assessing a battlefield. He’s all muscle, tattoos inked down his forearms, with a presence so intense it feels like the oxygen has been sucked out of the room.

Beside him, Bane is a brooding, silent cloud of darkness—so consuming it’s almost unsettling. Dark brown hair falls slightly over his forehead, his brown eyes indecipherable and his broad frame radiating a dark, pulsing energy. He exudes power—deeper than the obvious kind—that makes it feel dangerous just to look at him.

Brooklyn lets out a slow breath. “*Damn*”

Vaughn nods, inked arms crossed over his broad chest, eyes locked on Roman. “Fuckin’ *dibs*.”

Brooklyn smirks. “Roman?”

Vaughn gestures lazily between Evelina’s brother and Bane. “I mean, *either*. But Roman?” he groans. “He looks like he fucks and fights like a god. That’s a winning combo for me.”

Milena rolls her eyes. “Do you need a cold shower?”

“Depends. Will he be there, too?”

Naomi's eyes land on Bane before she shivers violently. “Okay, Evie’s brother is hot, but his friend is terrifying.”

Vaughn shrugs. “Big ‘bury a body in the woods and never speak of it again’ energy.” He strokes his jaw as he grins darkly. “I mean, I’m…into it.”

Evelina says goodbye to her brother and then walks over to us, dropping her bag on the floor and frowning. “What’s up?”

Brooklyn grins. “We were just talking about how fuckable your brother is.”

Evelina makes a horrified face. “*Gross.*”

Vaughn grins, entirely unrepentant. “What? He looks like he’s used to being in control, and I’d love to see how fast I could mess that up.”

Evelina groans, squeezing her eyes shut and shaking her head, like she’s trying to physically loosen that mental image. “Dude, *my brother*. Also, he’s straight.”

Vaughn winks. “Luckily, ‘but I’m straight’ is my favorite kind of foreplay.”

Before Evelina can respond, the sound of heels clicking against the floor announces Madame Kuzmina’s arrival.

And she’s not alone.

Beside her walks a girl I don’t recognize. She’s pretty in a very non-showy way, tall and lean, with dyed silvery-pink hair. A series of delicate black tattoos line her forearms, peeking from beneath the sleeves of her warm-up sweater. She doesn’t smile. Doesn’t speak. Just watches everything with a cool, perceptive gaze.

A hush settles over the room as Madame Kuzmina stops in the center, sweeping her gaze across the company before gesturing toward the girl.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is Dove Marchetti. She’s our newest Second Soloist.”

My brow furrows. Usually new dancers, even prospective soloists, have to do a series of auditions, not just walk in and be *announced.*

“Holy *shit*,” Milena murmurs quietly, leaning into the rest of us.

Evelina whistles under her breath. “I didn’t even know she was *back*.”

I frown. “Hi, yes, hello. Not a subscriber to mafia world gossip weekly?”

“Yeah, who is that?” Naomi whispers.

“Don Marchetti’s other daughter,” Milena says quietly. “But rumor has it, her dad had her sent away for the last few years.”

Naomi blinks. “Sent away where?”

Milena lowers her voice even more. “Depends on which version of the story you believe. The polite one is that she was ‘overseas’,” she air-quotes with her fingers. “But the spicier one?” She pauses, clearing her throat, “A ‘mental wellness’ center.”

I raise a brow. “Why does that sound like code for something?”

Milena’s lips quirk. “Because it is. Word is, she had a *ton* of issues with drugs and mental health. So her dad shipped her off and swept her under the rug while Ciara went and played the doting mafia princess role.”

All of us turn, brows arching as Kuzmina clears her throat sharply, silencing the smatterings of whispers and hushed conversations.

“Dove will be understudying Naomi in *Swan Lake*.”

Woah.

I turn to see the panicked uncertainty on Naomi’s face. She blinks rapidly, looking like she just got sucker punched. I reach over and take her hand in mine, squeezing it and flashing her a comforting smile.

“*Understudy*,” I whisper. “Don’t let it throw you.”

Madame doesn’t give anyone time to process the bombshell, just turns sharply and motions for everyone to follow. “Come. We will run the act two *pas des deux*.”

Naomi and I exchange a look as everyone gets to their feet. Then Kuzmina turns to Naomi. “I’d like Dove to do this run-through, Naomi. Just to see where we are. She’s actually performed the role before. Isn’t that right, my dear?”

She turns to Dove, who subtly nods her head as she pulls her pinkish-silver hair back into a tight bun and rolls her neck.

"Begin," Kuzmina says, her tone making it clear there will be no further discussion. I watch as she leaves the stage and melts through the darkness of the auditorium to her usual place, four rows back.

Dove simply steps into position with Miguel, one of the company's male dancers who'll be playing our Prince Siegfried in *Swan Lake*, her expression focused.

The music starts.

She starts to move.

And *holy shit*.

Her movements are *unreal*.

Dove's technique is flawless, graceful in a way that makes your jaw drop. Every movement is elegant and controlled, every expression perfectly matched to the character.

Between Brooklyn and me, Naomi groans. "*Fuck*," she whispers. "She's incredible."

Brooklyn smiles comfortingly, wrapping an arm around Naomi's shoulders.

On my other side, Milena leans in close, her voice quiet enough that only I can hear.

"You need to be smart about this."

I glance at her, frowning. "About what?"

She doesn't look at me: her gaze is still locked on Dove. "About this marriage. Like, you don't have to be a pawn."

A cold prickle ripples down my spine. "I'm not a pawn."

She tilts her head slightly, considering. "Good. Don't let yourself *become* one."

I press my lips together. “He doesn’t—” I stop myself. Doesn’t *what*? See me as a piece to be moved? Expect me to obey? I don’t even know if I believe that myself.

Milena doesn’t push, but she doesn’t let me off the hook either. “You’re married to a man who makes the world bend to his will. That’s not going to change just because you wear his ring.” She watches me, waiting. “Don’t *bend*. Not for him. Not for anyone.”

Something in my chest tightens.

Milena glances back to the stage. “The mafia world will eat you alive if you let it. The only way to survive is to know when to play along and when to push back.” She exhales slowly. “Trust me. You know this world, but…and I say this with love…it’s different when you were born into it like I was. You don’t strike me as the type who likes being told what to do, is all.”

I let out a soft laugh, shaking my head. “No.”

“Good.” She nods. “Make sure *he* knows that.”

I don’t respond. I don’t know how to. Because the truth is, I don’t know if I have the ability to push back at all.

We both return to watching Dove absolutely *killing it* on stage. And suddenly…

I feel watched.

It’s a slow, creeping sensation, crawling up the back of my neck. I scoot on my butt a little further stage left, my fingers tightening around my ankles as I sit on the floor, my eyes scanning the theater.

The house is dim beyond the stage lights, shadows stretching into the corners and swallowing up the velvet-draped walls. I glance at my friends, but they’re focused on Dove, watching wide-eyed, whispering about her flawless technique. None of them seems to notice anything out of place.

But I *know* someone’s watching me.

My pulse races. Slowly, carefully, I let my gaze drift upward, past the empty orchestra pit, past the velvet chairs, and up to the private boxes.

At first, there's nothing. Just darkness. Then, in the corner of my vision, movement. A presence.

There.

Box Five.

For a single, heart-stopping moment, I see him. A figure in the shadows. Tall. Still. Watching.

Masked.

And instantly my heart lurches into my throat when I find myself staring into the dark, black, emotionless eyes of The Hound.

My pulse skips.

Then he's gone.

I blink rapidly, my stomach twisting. The box is definitely empty now.

But I know—*know*—he was there.

A shiver rolls down my spine. He left no trace, no lingering sound, no confirmation of his presence. But I can feel it. Feel *him*, like always.

A sick realization hits me like a punch to the gut.

My father watched from the shadows, too.

I can still remember the way he fixed on people before they realized he was there—lingering in doorways, blending into the background, making himself invisible until it was too late. His gaze was always sharp, assessing, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

It's horrifying to think back on it now, but before I knew what he was, my father used to turn it into a game. He'd be somewhere with me—park, playground, the mall—and I'd find him pausing and just…*looking* at someone. Studying them, his body perfectly still.

Sometimes I'd ask him what he was doing, and he'd tell me we were playing a game.

“Don’t let them see you, Lyra,” he’d murmur, bending to point someone out to me. “Follow their eyes. See where they’re going to look before they even realize they’re going to look there themselves.”

“Why are we playing this game?”

“Because when you watch someone you get to know them better than they know themselves, Lyra.”

Carmine watches, too.

He doesn’t lurk hidden. But he *watches*, and when Carmine watches, it’s with purpose. Like he’s claiming something, branding it for his gaze alone.

And I allow it.

God help me, I *want* him to.

My hands clench into fists around my shins. *Am I seeking out a man like my father?*

The venomous, toxic thought burns like acid in my throat, nauseating me. There’s no denying the commonality: the darkness. The power. The way they both exist just beyond the edges of light, out of reach.

But Carmine’s darkness is different—isn’t it?

Isn’t it?

I squeeze my eyes shut for a second, forcing myself to sort through the tangled mess of thoughts clawing through my mind.

My father watched to control. To manipulate. To hurt.

Carmine watches because he *desires*.

Is that better? Worse?

Or exactly the same?

A terrifying thought presses against the back of my skull, its weight suffocating.

It isn’t just that I’m drawn to Carmine’s darkness.

It’s that I *want* it.

He sees a part of me I’ve spent years pretending wasn't there—raw and hungry, *answering* his.

Was it always there, hidden behind the walls I built in the hopes they would keep me safe? Or is he the one pulling it out of me?

The worst part…

I don’t know if I want him to stop.

The *pas de deux* finishes, and everyone starts to clap. But all I see is darkness beyond the lights. All I feel is the weight of unseen eyes.

Carmine’s presence lingers like smoke, curling into the crevices of my mind, impossible to ignore.

Maybe he was never actually here at all.

But deep down, I know he was.

And he’ll *always* be watching.

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THE HOUND

THE UNDERGROUND CATHEDRAL space that houses the Court burns with candlelight. Shadows flicker long and jagged across marble floors. Sin hangs in the air, thick and heavy.

Around me a decadent, orgiastic scene straight out of the decline of the Roman empire plays out.

…Which is *exactly* what we were going for when we built this organization.

But back then, we were young. Young*er*, at least. And while I can't speak for the others, for me personally, some of the allure of those earlier… *excesses* has faded.

From behind my mask, my eyes drag across the scene in front of me: masked women draped across velvet lounges, dresses slipping low on bare shoulders. Some topless, some wearing even less.

Ten years ago, my cock would have been salivating over this buffet of flesh.

Now? Nothing.

It's not age that's done this to me. It's not that "somewhere along the way I grew up" or "with maturity comes…" whatever bullshit someone wants to pass off as sagely wisdom.

It's that someone has caught—and held—the attention of my darkness in a way no other woman ever has, no matter how tempting any of them look, laid out like a meal.

There’ve been women before Lyra.

But none has ever come *close* to captivating the monster inside me like she does. None has even remotely sparked the same obsessive fascination, the almost violent need to pry inside her soul; to dig my fingers into it to see what I find when I sift through.

Part of it, I know, is that I’ve never once explored my darker kinks with anyone the way I have with Lyra.

I’ve chased people, yes. But I’ve chased *men*, and *not* for the same reasons I chased her.

I hounded those men for the thrill of the hunt and the anticipation of the kill.

Lyra’s the first one I’ve chased with the anticipation of feeling her pulse thud beneath my fingers. With a burning need to feel her thighs wrapped around my hips as my dick plunges into her greedy cunt while she’s still trying to catch her breath from the flight.

Now, she’s become the only thing I *ever* want to chase. My favorite obsession.

God help her.

While I’m happy to sit idly by, sipping my wine and watching the hedonism unfold around me, the others aren’t content to be bystanders.

The Bull sprawls on a chaise near the altar, three women draped over him—two blondes and a brunette with deeply tanned skin. Their hands slide over his chest, fingers working at the buttons of his shirt as they giggle playfully beneath their masks.

The Raven is across the room, sitting with another woman, his body angled to her, his hand lazily tracing the stem of his glass. He doesn’t touch her. He doesn’t need to.

She’s already his.

I know how he operates. He's noticed everything: the way she breathes, the way her pulse flutters at her throat. She won’t even realize what’s

happening until she’s caught in his web, tangled in strings she won’t know how to cut.

I sometimes think The Raven might have been better suited for The Order at Knightsblood. He’s precise. Calculating. But in the end, he’s still Para Bellum through and through.

The Stag is hunting. A pretty girl stands before him. He leans in, his voice low and hypnotic as he reaches up and strokes her jaw with a finger. The girl—another blonde, in a black gown and black choker—looks up at him through her mask, clearly hanging on every word.

You fucking idiot.

Whatever she thinks she’s getting into with him, she isn’t ready for it.

Nobody is.

I mean, I’ve got my own darkness, and it runs *deep*. But The Stag’s?

His darkness is limitless, and there’s no line between play and prey for him.

I take another sip of wine, dragging my gaze over to The Wolf—prowling, of course. I watch as he leads two girls to the entrance of the maze. They follow eagerly, whispering to each other, their laughter breathless.

He’d better remember that it’s almost time for Court to be in session.

I really should be reveling in this excessive world we built with our own hands.

But I’m not, because her voice won’t fucking leave my head.

You’re a monster.

It still echoes, rattling around in my skull. I roll my shoulders, trying to exhale it out, but the weight of it lingers, sinking deeper.

“You look lonely over here.”

I take my time pulling my gaze from The Wolf to the woman standing in front of me: dark black hair, porcelain skin, ruby red lips, and a dress that looks like I could take one look at it and it'd be pooling at her ankles.

She’s got long legs, too.

Good for running.

A scowl curdles behind my mask.

“What I look like, if you’re actually bothering to look,” I growl witheringly, “is uninterested.”

She fucking stays where she is, cocking her hip and making what I’m sure she thinks is a coy expression.

It’s not. It’s fucking irritating, and it’s only getting worse by the second.

“I would *move*, if I were you,” I mutter.

She grins, sliding toward me, looking like she's about to climb into my lap.

Yeah, no.

Immediately, I’m grabbing her wrist, lurching to my feet, and shoving her away.

“*Away*,” I snarl. “If I were you, I would move *away* from me.”

"I—*sorry*," she stammers, all the coyness gone from her face as she stumbles back, spilling some of her champagne and scurrying back to her friends across the room near the bar.

Good. Fucking stay there.

I can feel many eyes on me as I sink back into my seat. Moments later, I see The Bull disentangle himself from the women fawning over him. He stands, shaking his head at them as he halfway buttons his shirt and moves my way. The Stag also leaves the girl he was talking to, joining The Bull as he comes to a stop in front of me.

“You’re in a wonderful mood,” The Bull says.

I say nothing, rolling my shoulders.

The Stag watches me. “Is this about Nikolayev threatening to test boundaries—”

I exhale sharply. “Let him test all he wants. He won’t like the results. Look, I’m here. That’s enough, isn't it.”

Such a lie. My attention keeps drifting to the tempting weight of my phone in my pocket.

I tell myself not to look.

You’re a monster.

How do you live with yourself?

Quite fucking *well*, thank you.

I have no regrets. No ghosts haunting me of anyone whose last seconds of life were spent looking in horror into my eyes. No nightmares.

I lose no sleep.

That is how I "live with myself". Or at least, how I used to. It’s not like Lyra entering my world has suddenly given me a conscience, or the capacity to feel remorse or anything else I’m completely deficient in.

But she has made me almost wish I *could* have those things.

Maybe she wouldn’t think I was such a fucking monster if I could feel bad for the things I’ve done.

I exhale as I stand abruptly. “We should start. Someone get The Wolf before he disappears into the maze with those two.”

The Bull nods, turning to stride over to where The Wolf has an arm around each of the girls.

The Stag stays. His eyes, shrouded in shadow behind his mask, bore into me. His head tips slightly to the side, assessing me.

“Did she see more of you than you wanted her to?”

I frown. I know who he’s talking about. The words hit their mark, uncomfortably precise. I grind my teeth, looking away.

“More than she should have.”

The Stag is quiet for a beat.

“What’s that like?”

It’s not a taunt. Not idle curiosity, either. He’s *genuinely asking*—because he doesn’t know. Whatever *I’m* feeling, he never has.

My jaw is tight, but the words still slip out before I can stop them. “It’s terrifying.” My voice drops lower. “It’s fucking terrifying.”

The Stag nods slowly, weighing my answer, filing it away, cataloging me the same way he does everyone else.

Then, without another word, he turns and disappears into the crowd to round up the others, leaving me standing there with my words still burning in my throat.

I pull my phone from my pocket, thumbing the screen until I bring up the security feed I had installed at Zakharova Ballet. The rehearsal hall flickers into view.

Something snarls inside of me.

Lyra is alone.

She moves in front of the mirror, her body bending and stretching fluidly, effortlessly.

I watch the way she commands the space around her without trying. The way she breathes life into an empty room, the way she makes the darkness inside me tighten, coil, demand.

She doesn’t just call to my monster. She *feeds* him.

She forces me to confront how deep my darkness runs. How much I like it. How closely I embrace it.

That’s never bothered me before.

It does now.

Suddenly, over the soft music playing and the laughter of the guests around us, a sound rings out.

A single piano note.

I glance over to where The Raven is standing by the grand piano, his finger on the F sharp above middle C.

It’s time.

The indulgence, the hedonism—both vanish in an instant. Lust and pleasure have no place here now.

Court is in session.

The five of us step onto the raised dais, our seats towering over the room like thrones. The crowd falls silent, even the women who were draped over laps whispering into waiting ears moments ago, and takes their places on the benches in front of us, eyes forward, waiting.

An eerie hush settles over the underground cathedral. Then the doors open.

Two masked guards drag in the prisoner: Florian Berisha, a captain in the New York Albanian mafia.

His face is bloodied, his wrists bound in front of him. His chest rises and falls unevenly, but it’s not fear that flickers in his eyes. It’s defiance. He knows what we do here.

At least he had the sense to *try* and make a run for it after he got his Black Court summons—though clearly, that didn’t work out.

The Wolf speaks first, his voice laced with a thirst for violence and maybe even a bit of glee.

“Florian Berisha. You’ve been summoned to appear before this court for treason against your king. You betrayed Arian Kirakosian and sold information to the Colombian Cartel, thereby putting men you swore loyalty to in the ground.”

The Albanian spits blood onto the marble floor. “Just business,” he sneers. “And what the fuck authority do you have in this matter? I demand to speak to Arian!” he roars. “He and I will discuss this like men, not this…” His lip curls. “*Freak show*.”

Terrible choice of words, Florian.

Few things get under Wolf's skin. But being called a freak, or a monster, or maniac are on that list.

"*Say that again,*" The Wolf growls quietly in a measured, lethal tone.

Florian has the brains to shut the fuck up, even in his furious state.

"You're here," I say icily, "not simply because you broke rank, but because you broke a blood oath you swore to your king. Yes, we could have brought this to Arian's attention first, and let him deal with you…"

My shoulders bunch as I grip the edge of the table in front of us and lean forward, leering down into Florian's face.

"*But where's. The fun. In that.*"

A nervous titter of laughter ripples through the crowd. Florian's throat works as he swallows.

The Wolf clears his throat. "Verdicts."

"Guilty," The Raven says immediately.

"Guilty," The Wolf echoes, his voice a low growl.

"Guilty," The Stag murmurs, tilting his head, perhaps already picturing the man's last moments.

"Fuckin' guilty," The Bull grunts.

I don't hesitate. "Guilty."

The Wolf dips his chin. "You get a choice. Fight or flight."

Florian straightens, rolling his shoulders. "*Fight,*" he spits defiantly. He doesn't plead. Men like him *always* think they can fight their way out. "With fists. Like men."

Another ripple of amusement from the crowd. They know better.

The Bull stands. It's his turn. But dark hunger unfurls in my chest, sharp and consuming. The need to *remind myself what I am.*

“Allow me,” I murmur, turning to him.

The Bull hesitates, his body taut. I can see it in the way his fists clench—he wants this.

But he can tell that I *need it* even more.

After a beat, he steps back, giving me the kill.

I take my time as I step off the dais and walk forward. My shoes scuff against the stone as I close in on the disgraced captain.

He doesn’t hold back. With a roar, he hurls himself at me, throwing the first punch.

I let it connect.

Pain explodes along my jawbone, snapping my head to the side. Copper floods my mouth.

Good.

This is fucking *fuel*.

I roll my shoulders, spitting blood onto the floor. Then I lunge at him faster than I’m guessing he ever imagined I could. Our bodies slam to the floor, a brutal tangle of fists and bone. I don’t fight clean. I don’t fight fair.

I fight to fucking *destroy*.

My knuckles pound into his cheekbone, my other fist driving into his ribs over and over. Something cracks—rib, nose, doesn’t matter.

He chokes, trying to shove me off. But it’s too late.

I slam his head against the stone. His hands claw frantically at my wrists and arms, fighting the inevitable. But I’m stronger.

His breath comes fast, desperate. Mine is even. Steady.

I wrap my hands around his throat almost calmly.

I feel his pulse underneath my fingers. The panicked flutter. I squeeze. His body bucks beneath mine, nails scraping my wrists, feet kicking uselessly

on the floor.

I don’t stop. Don’t let go. I want to feel the moment his body surrenders and the fight leaves it. The moment I take his life in my hands and crush it into oblivion.

When it happens, I feel nothing.

The cathedral is pin drop silent as I push to my feet, my hands slick with blood.

I step back, looking down at the man I just ended. I should feel the same satisfaction I’ve felt every time before.

I don’t.

I turn away, my boots echoing against the stone floor as I approach the ancient basin at the side of the cathedral. The water inside ripples faintly in the dim candlelight.

I plunge my hands in, the water turning red as I scrub the blood from my skin, then stare at my reflection in the water after I pull my hands out again.

It’s not her words that bother me.

It’s the fact that for the first time in my life, I care what someone *thinks* of me.

Behind me, the Court has moved back to the hedonistic party it was before. Guards enter and drag Florian’s body away, wine is poured, and the rest of the Kings descend the dais to rejoin the party, each in his own way.

Darkness is still throbbing in my veins as I pull my phone back out and bring up the feed.

I scowl when I don’t see her in the rehearsal hall anymore.

I check the stage, then the lobby. I haven’t put a camera in her dressing room—for reasons I don’t quite understand—but the camera I have *outside* it shows that the light is off under the door.

I flick to the feed that shows the alley out back, and my jaw grinds.

Lyra is talking with two men, standing *far* too close to her.

Talking *far* too familiarly with her.

One of them puts a hand on her shoulder, and I almost break my phone in half.

Suddenly, the blood I just spilled and the violence I just indulged in isn't nearly enough to calm my monster.

And when she walks off in the direction of a car with the two of them, I see *red*.

Lyra pulls out her phone. For a second, I tense, waiting for a text from her. But then I see one of those motherfuckers shake his head and *put his fucking hand back on her shoulder*.

Like she's his, not decidedly *mine*.

She puts the phone away and gets into the car.

Blackness rises up inside me. Dark ink smears through my veins.

Time to remind her exactly what kind of monster she married.

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24

LYRA

THE ONLY SOUND in the studio is the soft shuffle of my feet against the floor, the slight gasped intake of breath as I power through to the end of the combination.

The mirrors reflect my flushed skin, the rise and fall of my chest. Sweat beads at my temple and trickles down my spine, but the exhaustion is actually a welcome distraction.

I gather up my things, slinging my bag over my shoulder. I should shower here, but it's late and I don’t want to linger. Also, the thought of peeling my clothes off in an empty locker room sends an uneasy prickle down my spine for some reason. I’ll shower at home.

Home. The word still doesn’t feel real when applied to the Barone mansion.

I should hate it there. Part of me still does. The sheer scale of the house swallows me whole. And it still doesn’t feel like mine.

I’m not sure if it *ever* will.

But it’s not just the house.

It’s *him.*

Carmine.

I don’t know what to make of him. Of *us.* It’s not as simple anymore as him just being the monster who stormed into my life and tore it to shreds. The

cold-blooded man who forced a ring onto my finger.

It's that he makes me feel anchored.

And that scares me.

I shouldn’t feel this way when he’s capable of such violence and brutality. When I’ve seen past the figurative mask and glimpsed the devil lurking behind those cold blue eyes and that perfect bone structure.

But there’s something in the way he looks at me—like I belong to him and he’d raze the world if it was necessary to keep me.

I hate it, but I crave that.

But it’s not even just that, or the memory of his hands on me when he claimed me like he had every right.

It’s the way his presence lingers even when he’s not there. The way his absence feels like a game I don’t know the rules to.

He hasn’t touched me since that night. Hasn’t *spoken* to me. And yet, I feel him everywhere. My skin prickles when he walks into a room, my breath hitches when I catch him watching me.

Because that’s what he does. He watches.

And the worst part? I don’t know if I hate it.

I also don’t know if I want him to stay away, or force him to break the distance he’s put between us.

Don’t know if I want to run away entirely, or run so he will chase me again.

He makes me remember things I’ve tried to forget. Things I’ve buried so deep that I sometimes forget they’re even there—until they come roaring out in the blackest part of the night.

Dark things. Twisted things. Things I’ve always been ashamed of wanting.

But Carmine sees them, and he doesn’t let me hide from them.

And now, no matter how much I try to shove it down or try to tell myself that I shouldn't want what I do—

I can't unsee what's inside me.

I can't forget the way I responded to him.

And I sure as *hell* can't pretend it isn't still there, lurking beneath my skin, waiting for him to rip it out again to show it to me.

I tighten my grip on my bag and exhale decisively, forcing the thoughts away. I step outside into the cold night air, hoping it will clear my head. The alley is dark, just a dim glow of a flickering streetlamp cutting through the shadows. My breath fogs and I pull my coat tighter around me, shifting my bag on my shoulder.

Then I feel it.

The familiar, awful prickle of being watched—though it's not the same sensation I get when it's Carmine.

A figure steps out from the shadows, and my stomach clenches.

Marcus Chen smiles a sneering smile. "Hello, Lyra," he says smoothly, like we're old friends.

Of all the people to show up in the dead of night, it had to be Marcus; AKA the motherfucker who runs The Truth Report. The same asshole whose been peddling lies about me and my connections to my father's crimes for years.

And he's not alone. Chris Hodgkins lingers just behind him.

Heart-wrenching images of Jordana Hodgkins' face in the newspapers flash through my mind, along with the nauseating headlines about atrocities that happened twenty feet beneath the floor of the very kitchen I ate in every night.

The pure, seething hatred on Chris's face the night he found me in the bodega isn't as sharp now. He's tense, thoughtful, his fists curling and uncurling like he's trying to make a decision. Like he's not *entirely* convinced of what he's about to do.

Marcus, though? He’s convinced.

He steps forward, blocking my path. “Late night?”

I stiffen, forcing a blank expression even as my blood turns to ice in my veins. “Get away from me, Marcus.” I swallow heavily. “You can’t be near me. Restraining order, remember?”

His lips curve. “Fuck the restraining order.” He glances back at Chris, then nods toward the street. “We have things to discuss. Some hard questions for you.”

I shift, my grip tightening on my bag. “I have nothing to say to you.”

Marcus’s smile doesn’t waver. “Oh, I think you have *everything* to say to me.”

I take a step back. Suddenly, his one hand lands heavily on my shoulder. The other opens his coat just a bit.

I see the cold glint of metal.

A *gun*.

My breath catches. Marcus leans in, voice low. “I’d hate for this to get messy. But the people are *done* with your lies.”

A sharp pulse of fear zips through me. I glance at Chris. His jaw is tight, his eyes flicking between us.

He doesn’t like this.

Good. Maybe that will work in my favor.

“This way, Lyra. Move. Now.”

I’m shaking as Marcus leads me to a waiting car. The engine’s running, and there’s another guy behind the wheel—a swarthy, bearded man who glares pure hate at me.

“Get in the fucking car, *monster*.”

His words slam into me and I shudder as his eyes eviscerate me.

I’ve seen his type before. I’ve seen that same look of pure hatred and revulsion in the eyes of a dozen or so of Marcus’ more fervent followers over the years—men who read his blog, where he’d publicly post my address. Or listened to his podcast where he’d spew lies about me—that I lured the girls in and was in cahoots with my father.

Or the foulest lie of all: that I *assisted* in their torture and assault.

Nausea rises inside me. For a second, I reach for the phone in my pocket. But the second I pull it out, Marcus shakes his head and puts his meaty hand on my shoulder again.

“Don't be fucking stupid, Lyra. Get in the car.”

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25

LYRA

"HOW THE FUCK does someone even *get* so twisted so young?"

Marcus' harsh voice cuts through the thick air of the dim dive bar like a knife, sharp and unrelenting. My hands tremble under the table, fists curled in my lap, but I keep my face neutral.

Don't react. Don't give him anything.

But it's *so* hard.

The air is stifling, and rancid with the scent of stale beer. I don't know where we are, a side street somewhere in the Lower East Side, near Alphabet City. The low murmur of voices from across the bar is indistinct, muffled.

All I can hear is Marcus.

I can feel the weight of his eyes pressing down on me, pinning me to the booth like an insect under glass. He sits across from me, his phone on the table recording the "conversation"—probably so he can play it on his podcast for his lunatic base of listeners who can't distinguish a badly told fairytale from reality.

Kevin, the swarthy guy who drove us here, glares at me from the chair he's pulled up to the booth, his heavy, tattooed arms resting on the table.

Chris sits next to me, side-eying me coldly. He's still got a look on his face that suggests he maybe didn't quite sign up for this, though.

“You were there, Lyra,” Marcus hisses, leaning forward, his dark eyes gleaming with a sick pleasure that makes my stomach twist. “You *lived* in that house. You expect us to believe you didn’t hear them?”

My throat feels raw, but it’s nothing compared to the burn in my chest. The pressure is building, coming in from all sides, crushing me.

“*I didn’t know*,” I whisper. My voice barely carries over the hum of the bar. “It was under the basement, heavily soundproofed—”

Kevin snorts, slumping back in his chair. “*Fuck you*, bitch. We’re tired of your government-sponsored lies. What the fuck *else* are you keeping from the public?”

Chris stays quiet, his fists clenched against his knees. You can almost feel his grief in the air, coiled tight and dangerous. But Marcus? He's enjoying this.

He leans in closer, his breath reeking of whiskey and bitterness. “How many girls did you bring to the basement?” His voice is low, wheedling, coaxing me to confess. “How many did you help him take? Or did you just help him *keep* them?”

Bile rises in my throat. My fingers dig into my thighs, trying to anchor myself and stop the memories from rushing in.

The door in the corner of the basement I was told to stay away from. The day it was left slightly ajar.

The sobbing. The sound of flesh slapping flesh. The cages and chains, the racks of pretty dresses…

I shake my head fiercely. “I didn’t—”

“*Liar*.”

His hand slams against the table, the sound like a gunshot in the oppressive quiet of our corner of the bar. I jump, my nails biting into my skin.

“You honestly expect me to believe you weren’t part of it?” Marcus’ voice is colder now, sharper, each word cutting like a scalpel. “That you’re just some *poor, innocent victim*?”

Kevin laughs, the sound devoid of warmth. “You’re just as dirty as he was, bitch. Which of the girls did you diddle, hmm? How many did *you* rape, you fucking disgusting piece of shit?”

The words hit hard. My stomach lurches so violently I think I might be sick right here at the table.

As dirty as he was.

I can’t breathe.

The walls of the bar feel like they’re closing in, my vision blurring at the edges. My chest tightens. Please. Not here. Not now.

I can hear my own pulse roaring deafeningly in my skull. I try to find something to latch onto. A breath. A thought. A single moment that isn’t this.

But all I see and hear is him.

My father’s shadow stretching across the cold tile floor of that house, his voice turning soft when he wanted something.

I can’t be that.

I *can’t.*

Marcus doesn’t stop. His words keep chipping away at the foundation I’ve spent years trying to rebuild. The world is tilting. My chest is too tight, my breath too short and rapid.

The accusations slice me apart bit by bit. I can’t think, can’t move.

The door to the bar swings open.

The atmosphere changes instantly, killing the quiet murmur of the bar, and a charged silence settles over the room as Carmine surges in.

Not just walking. Consuming the space.

He's a storm rolling in, dark and violent, the kind of thing that makes people duck for cover. His normally ice blues eyes are almost black as they sweep over the bar until they lock with mine.

Possessiveness ignites in his gaze—a raw, seething kind of fury.

In an instant he's crossing to our booth. Chris immediately scrambles out of his seat and backs away. When Carmine gets to us he says nothing, his black presence chilling the whole space as his hand wraps like iron around my wrist.

“*Let’s go*,” he snarls viciously. “*Now*.”

He all but yanks me out of the booth, then whirls, dragging me stumbling and numb behind him as he storms to the door.

I try to explain, but I can’t breathe. The panic, the adrenaline, it’s too much—

My legs give out just as we get to the door.

Carmine barely catches me, his demeanor shifting from anger to something else entirely. Everything about him changes. His entire body locks up, his grip tightening—not in anger now, but in brutal protectiveness.

His hand fists the neck of my hoodie, pulling me to him, his other hand tilting my chin up. His thumb brushes my jaw, his eyes melting from arctic fury to raw intensity as his brow furrows.

“What did they do to you, little dancer?” he murmurs quietly, his voice edged like the blade of a knife.

I can barely breathe or think. But I manage to whisper, “That's Marcus Chen.”

Carmine goes still.

A slow exhalation leaves his lips, his grip tightens like a vice, and I swear, the whole room vibrates with the barely contained emotions flickering over his face.

“He’s—

“I know who the fuck he is,” he hisses quietly.

He lets me go and turns slowly.

I grab his elbow. “He has a gun,” I warn.

“It’s not going to help him.”

Then he moves like Death himself.

“Everyone out.” His voice is dangerous, slicing through the stillness of the bar.

The bartender doesn’t hesitate, just drops the glass in his hand and bolts. The few patrons scatter like roaches, shoving past each other in their hurry to leave.

Carmine slowly walks back to the booth in the rear of the bar as I sharply suck in a breath.

Kevin lurches to his feet and whirls as if to throw the first punch.

He never manages it.

Carmine’s enormous hand wraps around his throat, lifting him clean off his feet before hurling him across the room. Kevin slams into the wall, denting it before slumping to the floor, gasping for air.

Chris scrambles back, eyes bulging in horror.

“*Fuck you,*” Marcus sneers, jamming his hand into his coat. “Get the fuck—”

As he triumphantly yanks out the gun, Carmine grabs a pint glass, dumps out the beer, and brings it smashing down onto Marcus’ hand.

Marcus screams as blood spurts from the back of his hand, the gun clattering to the floor.

“You son of a bitch!” he wails, clutching his hand, his face twisted in pain. “You fucking son of a bitch!”

That’s when Kevin manages to drag himself up and lunge at Carmine.

Bad move.

Carmine sidesteps, grabs Kevin by the scruff of the neck and slams him down on a table. The wood splinters under the impact.

Kevin groans, flailing. Carmine hurls him to floor, grabs the chair Kevin was sitting in earlier, and raises it high overhead.

Holy fuck.

I watch as my husband morphs into an actual demon, bringing the chair down and smashing it over Kevin's head again and again until the light goes out in his eyes and blood is leaking from his ears.

Marcus is still writhing on the floor, trying to crawl away. He screams in agony when Carmine calmly walks over and stomps his heel down on the glass still embedded in Marcus' hand.

Carmine grabs the sobbing, bleating man by the collar and hauls him up onto his knees. And then he starts to beat him like I've never once seen *anyone* beat anyone else.

It's…shocking.

Almost too much to watch.

Almost.

At one point, Carmine slows. His raised fist is dripping blood as his gaze slowly turns to lock on my wide eyes.

His brow cocks.

And then, I do something the old Lyra wouldn't have done in a million years.

I nod.

Then I watch as my husband proceeds to beat the living *fuck* out of Marcus. I watch not as the Lyra who always tried not to walk too loudly. Tried not to offend. Tried to blend in.

I watch as the fucking Queen I've become with this man, presiding over a royal punishment. A fucking execution.

Fists collide with flesh. The sickening crunch of bone breaking flies through the room as Marcus' face turns into red, wet pulp.

When Carmine finally lets go, Marcus just drops to the ground, unable even to break his fall with his hands.

My husband turns to the final man as a lethal silence descends over the bar.

Chris is huddled in the corner. The horror on his face turns to pure terror when Carmine turns to him, ready to destroy, and cracks his bloodied knuckles as he slowly starts to walk over.

“Carmine.”

My hand lands on his arm. He flinches, a snarl on his lips as he whirls, a lion on the savannah who's been interrupted as he's about to pounce on dinner.

When his eyes manage to focus on me, the red mist clears and he pauses, a glimpse of humanity peeking through the cracks.

“He’s grieving,” I say quietly. “He’s in so much pain, Carmine,” I murmur. “His sister was…”

Chris flinches when I turn to look at him with compassion.

“My father…”

Carmine’s fingers twitch as he turns to level a cold look at Chris.

My hand finds his, gripping it tightly, trying to claw him back to his humanity.

“Carmine, *please*.”

He turns back to me. The mist clears a little more as he tilts his head to the side. One of his bloodied hands comes up, and he gently cups my jaw.

Slowly, he nods.

Without even looking at Chris again, Carmine’s hand tightens in mine as he starts for the door.

Then he pauses, letting me go and calmly walking over to where Marcus is blubbering and bleeding all over the ground. The conspiracy theorist flinches, whimpering pathetically as Carmine drags him halfway to his knees by the throat.

“If I ever see another article about her…” His voice is pure venom. “Or hear you mention her name on your fucking podcast again…” His grip tightens. “I will destroy you. It will not be quick. It *will* be messy. It will involve you swallowing your own severed cock. It will take *days*, perhaps weeks. You will beg for death and *I will not grant it*,” he seethes. “I will become your God and your Devil.” Marcus flinches as Carmine leans down into the mangled remains of his face. “*Have I made myself clear*.”

The blubbering sound emanating from Marcus’ former mouth apparently suffices. Carmine lets the piece of shit drop to the floor again and turns toward me.

Suddenly, with a last spurt of energy, Marcus groans and lunges across the floor, reaching for his gun.

“Carmine—!”

Carmine whirls, grabs Marcus by the throat, smashes the gun through his broken teeth—

And pulls the trigger.

I spin away, clamping both hands over my scream as my eyes stare, the image of Marcus’ head *evaporating* seared into my brain.

A hand takes mine, slowly pulling it from my mouth.

An arm goes around me, drawing me close.

Carmine's scent surrounds me, anchoring me as his lips touch the top of my head.

“Let’s go home, little dancer.”

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26

LYRA

My hands won't stop shaking.

I press them tight against my lap as Carmine drives through the city, willing them to be still, but the tremors don't stop.

My eyes slide toward him, sitting rigidly behind the wheel of the black Lamborghini, in utter control.

He hasn't looked at me once since we left the bar.

But suddenly, though not hurriedly, his hand drifts to rest on my thigh—heavy, possessive, fingers curled just enough to keep me in place and stop my hands from shaking.

Blood stains his knuckles. It's dry now, but I can still smell it.

Marcus Chen is dead. Carmine shot him. And I barely flinched.

What does that say about me?

I turn to stare out the window, my reflection barely visible in the streaks of light flashing past.

Carmine's grip on my thigh never wavers. When we finally pull up in front of the Barone mansion, I expect him to release me. But he doesn't, not immediately.

The engine cuts and goes quiet, and we sit there in the silence of the car, the city its usual chaos around us.

Then finally, still without a word, he steps out of the car and shuts the door behind him. I try to do the same, but there’s a missing connection between my brain and my muscles, like my body can't receive the message to open the door and step out to move on with my life after what just happened.

Then suddenly, my door opens. The night air rushes in. And before I can even process it, Carmine is carrying me.

I don’t protest.

Don’t fight.

Just let him.

His arms are strong, comforting, one cradling my knees, the other at my back. My cheek is pressed against his bloodstained suit jacket, but I don’t pull away as he carries me up the steps past his men and into the house.

He brings me up the grand staircase without a word. He steps slowly, carefully, letting the weight of what just happened settle.

I expect him to take me to the guest room. But he doesn’t.

He walks past the room I’ve been sleeping in, and keeps walking until he opens the door to—my chest tightens—*his* room.

When he pushes the door open and steps inside, the weight of everything crashes down and I start to crumble. My breath shudders and my vision blurs, the adrenaline abruptly wearing off. My body goes limp, exhaustion sinking into the very marrow of my bones.

Carmine sets me down on my feet, but I can’t hold myself up—instantly, I start to fold and crumple. Before I fall, his grip tightens, catching me.

His hands clamp onto my arms almost punishingly as he guides me to his bed and sits me on the edge of it.

"I knew he was obsessed with you, but I didn’t know it was that bad." His voice is quiet but dangerous, every word edged with barely contained fury. "I should’ve killed him the second he started uttering your name."

I swallow hard, trying to find my footing. He doesn't let go. His fingers tighten, forcing me to look at him, his grip unyielding.

I almost don’t want to even say it. But I do.

"It’s not the first time he’s come and found me like that," I whisper.

Carmine freezes.

"When?" His voice is sharp, with something else in it now that I can’t place.

I force myself to keep breathing. "A couple times. Sometimes it was just him, trying to get ‘the story’ from me. Sometimes it was his lunatic followers.” I swallow thickly. “I…I have—had—."

It’s *had*, now. Past tense, since I can still see Marcus’ head evaporating in that dive bar.

“I had a restraining order against him. Which…clearly didn’t mean a thing,” I mumble bitterly.

The air between us darkens.

"Why didn’t you tell me?" His voice is quiet, but somehow it feels louder than a shout.

I let out a bitter laugh. "Would it have changed anything?"

Carmine’s grip tightens, his jaw flexing, his eyes dark and unrelenting.

"You’re my wife. *Everything* about you fucking matters to me."

The words knock the air from my lungs. The silence that follows is thick, suffocating, stretching between us until I can’t take it anymore.

…And then, the words spill out of me. *Years* of them.

I tell him about the constant harassment. The insane conspiracy theorists who call me an accomplice, saying I must have known what my father was doing.

The families of the victims who blame me, who look at me and see a monster who stole their daughters.

The “special news presentations” discussing whether or not Sophia Ferguson, my father’s final victim—the girl I saw that day the door was left ajar—was killed *because* I’d run screaming from the house.

I tell him how I threw myself into dancing to escape the whispers. The eyes. The weight of it all.

Then, I tell him about the doubt that festers inside me.

“What if they’re right?” My voice shakes. “What if I *should* have known? What if—”

Carmine grabs me.

Not gently. Not carefully. Fiercely.

"You’re fucking perfect," he growls.

And then his lips crash to mine, all possessive heat, like he’s trying to brand himself onto my skin, pour himself into my blood.

I don’t fight him. I don’t want to.

Because this isn’t a battle anymore, nor a war, nor a struggle for dominance. It's surrender.

Not the kind that makes me weak or breaks me. The kind that binds.

His hands grip my face, his thumbs pressing into my jaw as he tips my head back, dragging his teeth over my lower lip.

“Every inch of you belongs to me,” he rasps raggedly. “No one else will ever touch you, or have you.”

A shiver rolls through me. It’s not fear. It’s want. A hunger that’s been building for days…weeks…maybe since the moment I first met him.

His fingers yank my hoodie over my head before his hands slide down, gripping my waist. “You were made for this. Made for *me*.”

The sweats I’ve got on over my tights and leotard go next as Carmine yanks them down roughly.

Then he steps back, his eyes dark as they devour me, taking in the thin fabric stretched over my body and the way my chest rises and falls with each uneven breath.

His fingers trace the straps of my leotard before hooking into them, pulling them off my shoulders.

He peels it down my body and over my breasts. The cool air kisses my skin before the heat of his gaze burns me.

He slips the leotard lower, exposing me inch by inch, his breath hitching as more of my skin is revealed. My pulse pounds with anticipation, but he doesn't rush.

"Fucking *perfect*," he growls.

I whimper when his mouth finds one of my breasts, devouring it greedily. I cry out sharply when his teeth sink into my tender nipple, sending an arresting mixture of pain and pleasure zipping through my body.

Carmine shoves my leotard and tights lower, pushing them over my hips before pulling away from my throbbing nipple and dropping to his knees in front of me.

His hands slide over my waist, my hips, my thighs, gripping, claiming. Then he drags the leotard and tights down together, inch by inch, his fingertips brushing every newly exposed part of me.

My breath stutters as I watch him bring them to my ankles and then take them off. My fingers grip his shoulders, my balance unsteady.

Carmine's eyes slide up mine. Then he leans in, his mouth lowering between my thighs.

I stiffen, my hands on his shoulders. "Wait—I haven't showered—"

Yeah. Like there's ever been any stopping Carmine.

He pauses, but doesn't move away. He lifts his gaze, his piercing blue eyes locked on mine, his fingers digging possessively into my hips. My breath catches as he leans even closer to my pussy.

“I already told you, you’re fucking perfect.” His voice is commanding. “You don’t want to contradict me.”

Fuck. Me.

The way he says it. The certainty. The possessiveness.

A tremor rolls through me, making my breath catch, and all my fight drains away.

His lips curl into a smirk. “That’s what I thought.”

Then he leans in again.

A low moan rips from my chest as his mouth presses to my pussy. He growls into me like an animal—literally *growls*—as his grip on my hips tightens. My eyes roll back when his wet tongue snakes between my lips, spreading me open, pushing deep.

“*Carmine…*”

His tongue drags through my lips, flicking over my swollen clit. I whimper loudly, my hands sliding into his hair as my legs shake.

“Keep running those hands through my hair, baby. Like you don’t ever want me to stop.”

His lips fasten around my clit and a choked cry of pleasure tears from my throat as he sucks hard, swirling his tongue around it. My body sags, my hips shamelessly pushing against his mouth and tongue as he turns my world inside out.

"Look at you,” he groans. “Shaking, dripping, so fucking *needy*, like a greedy little slut.”

His mouth pulls away from my pussy. Suddenly, I’m gasping as he pushes me back, toppling me over. I hit the bed with a whimper, then he shoves me down and roughly spreads my legs wide open. Carmine grabs my hands, placing them on the backs of my thighs.

“Hands right here, little dancer,” he growls. “Be a good girl and open yourself up for me. *Show me what’s mine.*"

His mouth dips between my legs again. My eyes roll back as he wraps his lips around my clit and bats his tongue across the swollen bud. Two of his fingers push into me, curling deep and stroking up against a place inside me in a way that makes my back arch from the bed.

I can't breathe. Can't think.

Just feel.

His tongue is relentless, his fingers curling perfectly into me. I grip my thighs tightly, keeping myself right where he wants me.

I whimper brokenly and helplessly as his other hand grabs my ass, his fingers digging into my flesh possessively, bruising it.

"Come for me, little dancer," he rasps against my pussy. "Let me feel you come right now."

I arch, my body chasing the pleasure all at once.

"*That's* it… Give it to me… Don't hold back… Give me every fucking drop…"

His voice is darkly hypnotic as it snakes through my veins, making the pleasure coil even tighter.

"So sensitive. So perfect. Look at you, baby, so fucking *wrecked* for me."

I cry out, my hands gripping my thighs so hard I swear I'm going to draw blood.

"You don't come for anyone but me. Say it."

I sob, barely able to think.

"*Say it*, Lyra."

"Only for you," I gasp, right on the edge.

And then, I fucking *shatter.*

Pleasure roars through me, pulling me under, drowning me in heat, in fire, in Carmine.

I writhe, screaming his name. He doesn’t stop: his grip tightens, keeping me right there, letting me feel everything.

“Good girl.”

I’m still coming down, trembling, my breath uneven, but Carmine doesn’t give me time to recover. I watch him, dazed, as he stands and shrugs off his black dress shirt, revealing muscle, power, and precision. It’s like every inch of him has been sculpted for destruction and carved from raw brutality. His broad chest, his chiseled abs, the v-lines of his hips. His forearms, roped with veins, flex as he drags his belt free, slow and deliberate.

Fucking hell.

Something dark and dangerous coils in my core as my thighs clench together.

He’s lethal.

The way he moves, the way his body is built to dominate and destroy.

The way he knows exactly what he does to me.

Savageness glints in his eyes as he crawls over me, his weight pressing me down. He moves like a wild animal, caging me beneath him, his hands gripping my wrists, pinning them to the bed as his hips spread my thighs apart.

His scent envelops me, his breath hot against my neck.

His fingers twist into my hair at the nape of my neck, possessive and demanding. His other hand cups my jaw roughly as he slides two fingers over my lips and then pushes them into my mouth.

“Taste yourself. Taste how fucking messy you get for me. Lick your cum off my fingers like a good girl.”

I whimper, my eyes locked on his as my lips wrap around the intruding fingers. I suck on them, tasting myself when he strokes them over my tongue. They slide free, and suddenly his mouth slams to mine, fierce, unrelenting. He lets me taste more of myself on his tongue, a filthy, branding claim, reminding me whose I am.

Heat throbs through my core when I feel his huge, swollen cock drag up my lips, forcing them apart. He centers himself against my opening, his thick size taking my breath away.

His hand moves, gripping my hip, dragging his cock against me. His skin is hot, his muscles taut, flexing and grinding so perfectly I can barely breathe.

“You’re so *messy* for me,” he murmurs, dragging his lips over my throat. “So fucking greedy. Look at you, baby—all dripping and desperate. You need this, don’t you.”

I nod, unable to form words, my nails digging into his shoulders.

His chuckle is low, knowing. “Such a good girl.”

Then—he slides in.

I cry out, my hands fisting his hair, my body stretching, *taking*.

He doesn’t stop, doesn’t slow down. He slams into me, his grip unforgiving, merciless…perfect.

“Take it,” he grunts, his breath hot against my ear. “Take every inch of this thick fucking dick, baby. This is *my* fucking pussy. It belongs to me, and me alone.” I cry out as he rams harder into me, grinding so deep that my eyes roll back.

“That goes for you, too, little dancer,” he groans, thrusting harder. “You want to touch this pussy? You want to rub your greedy little clit and make yourself come?”

Carmine fucks harder into me, his massive cock stretching me to my limit as I drip all over him.

“Then you’ll have to get on your knees and ask my permission first,” he snarls. “Because this is my fucking pussy now. Not yours. *Mine*. Now—show me how much *my* fucking pussy needs my cock.”

Sweet. Fucking. *God*.

My body yields, welcomes him even deeper, and his groan is pure, feral possession. He grips my thighs, spreading them wider, watching where

we’re joined with dark, ravenous hunger.

“Look at you, baby. Taking me like you were fucking made for it.”

I moan shamelessly, my head tipping back against the pillows. But his fingers wrap around my throat, tilting my chin down, forcing my gaze to his.

“Uh-uh,” he growls. “Eyes on me.”

I shudder, blinking at him through the haze of pleasure. His sharp blue eyes are so dark, like midnight and malice. Unhinged, all-consuming.

His hands flex, his fingers pressing against my jaw. “That’s it, baby. Don’t ever hide from me.”

He thrusts deeper, harder, ripping another moaning cry from my throat.

“That’s my fucking good girl,” he growls. “So fucking perfect.”

His hands hold my hips, dragging me against him, using my body exactly the way he wants.

“Tell me who you belong to,” he demands.

I can’t answer. Can’t do anything but take his cock.

His hand moves between us, stroking, teasing, pushing me higher as he rolls and pinches my clit.

“*Say it*,” he growls. “Say it, or I won’t let you come.”

I sob, already breaking apart.

“*Yours*,” I gasp. “*Yours*!”

His groan is pure fucking victory.

He slams his mouth to mine, swallowing every cry, every breath, every single piece of me.

“So fucking perfect, baby. You were *made* for my fucking cock. I want to fuck you against the wall of the Louvre like the goddamn masterpiece you are.”

The words tear through me, heat gathering low and deep, my body unraveling in his hands.

Then I shatter.

Pleasure detonates through me, violently all-consuming, tearing through my limbs, my spine, my breath. I convulse against him, body arching, fingers clawing into his back, dragging, desperately trying to hold on, trying to anchor myself in the storm he's unleashed inside me.

Carmine doesn't stop.

Doesn't let me drift into the haze of release, doesn't let me float away from him.

He growls, his hand fisting in my hair, keeping me right here beneath him, trapped in the devastation of my own climax.

"That's it, baby. Take it like my good girl."

His hips rock harder, rougher, keeping me right at the edge, balanced between pleasure and something deeper, darker.

His teeth scrape against my jaw, my throat.

Then he bites down.

Hard.

His teeth sink into my neck, sharp and unrelenting, my skin breaking under the pressure. A strangled cry rips from my lips as a fresh wave of heat slams through me, pain and pleasure tangled together, feeding into each other, making me dizzy, weightless.

He groans against my skin, his tongue lapping over the mark, soothing it, then biting again, like he can't help himself, needs to mark me deeper.

"Mine," he snarls. His voice is pure savagery. "You're fucking mine forever. *No one* else gets this. *No one* else fucking touches you."

I nod frantically, unable to do anything but let him brand me in a way that goes beyond flesh.

His hands grip my thighs and hips, fingers digging in hard, bruising, holding me in place as he drives into me with reckless force.

"So fucking greedy for me, baby. You love this. Love being *filled*. Look at you, taking every inch of me."

His words only drag me deeper under, making me tremble and whimper and beg.

I’m already raw and aching, but then I feel his restraint snapping, feel the moment he lets go, gives in to his need and lets it devour him whole.

His thrusts turn frantic, wild, his breath hot on my sweat-slicked skin. I sob, my legs shaking under his iron grip, my hands tangled in his hair, my nails scraping his scalp.

A ragged growl erupts from his throat, his body tightening, every muscle flexing, his hips slamming one last time, burying himself so deep inside me I swear I feel him touch my soul.

His groan is wrecked and destroyed as his cum pulses into me, heat spilling deep, claiming me from the inside out.

He stays there, his forehead pressed to mine, our breath mingling, his hands still locked tight around my body like he’ll never let go.

Maybe I don’t want him to.

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27

CARMINE

SHE'S STILL HERE.

That should piss me off. I've never had a woman spend the night in my bed.

Truth be told, I've never had one in my bed at *all*.

Lyra's presence in it come morning should cause a tremor in the control I exude over my life and turn the monster inside me into a demon.

Shocker beyond shocker: it doesn't.

I like having her here. I like watching her sleep. In fact, watching my wife sleep might be my newest obsession.

My eyes slide over her bare body as she curls next to me, sunlight playing across her skin. Across the marks I left there last night, like ink on a once-pristine page.

Fingerprints blooming across her thighs, bite marks at her throat, shadows of my grip staining her ribs. A masterpiece in black and blue.

She's covered in me. But *not* covered by a sheet. I pulled that off the second I woke up. Yes, my new favorite pastime might be watching her sleep. But I prefer to take in that view *unobstructed*.

My gaze lingers on her closed eyes; on the way her lips purse just slightly as she sleeps. I pull my eyes lower, over her body, across the taut pink points of her nipples, over her athletic body toned from years of dancing.

Her calloused toes. Her strong legs.

…The way I catch just enough of a glisten on her pink pussy to make me wonder what she’s dreaming about.

It’d better fucking be me.

I reach over and drag my fingertip up her slit. She murmurs quietly in her sleep, shifting.

Opening her legs a little more.

Greedy fucking girl.

I slip my finger into her, stroking in and out shallowly. I don't want to wake her up, but I *do* want a morning taste of her. Which is exactly what I get when I pull my finger back and wrap my lips around it.

Fucking delicious.

I reach for her again, stroking my finger into her wet pussy and coating it with her glistening arousal again before I lick it clean and sink back against the pillows.

I should feel satisfied.

I don’t.

I lift my hand, flexing my fingers. The knuckles are raw from last night; from the satisfying crunch of bone under my fists, when my body welcomed the violence like an old friend.

I should be at peace after what I did to Marcus Chen. After wiping his existence from the world. Instead, I want *more*. More vengeance. More violence.

I only ever feel this way with family. That’s how it’s always been. My blood is my blood. My circle is small, unbreakable. My rage and extreme protectiveness are for them and no one else.

So why the fuck do I feel it with her?

If the way I’ve lived my entire life up until now is any indication, I should be done with her. That’s the way I operate: I take, I use, I walk away.

But she’s still here. And the thought of her anywhere else—in someone else’s hands or bed—sends twisting ugliness crawling down my spine.

I shift, running a hand through my hair, exhaling slow. The control is familiar. But the need to keep her, protect her, and destroy anything that even looks at her wrong—that’s new.

New, insatiable, and fucking *savage*.

I start to catalog the threats against her in my mind.

Marcus is gone. Good. Fuck him. Grigori Popov is also history, as are the two motherfuckers he sent to collect whatever ridiculous debt he wanted Lyra to pay in Arkadi's place.

There are the more…fervent…family members of Arkadi’s victims, like the fucker I was about to also kill last night before Lyra intervened. The other conspiracy theorist lunatics, who followed Marcus’ click-bait "blog" and idiotic podcast.

They still exist, even if their false idol of a leader's head is splattered over a dive bar in Alphabet City.

Then there’s Kir Nikolayev. That threat might have more to do with me or the Black Court. But in my current mood, I’m lumping that Russian fuck in with the rest of the perceived potential threats against Lyra.

My fingers flex again.

I feel it creeping up my spine: a vicious urge to erase every single one of them before they even have a chance to think about touching her.

Lyra stirs beside me, her lips parting with a soft sigh. I force myself to relax.

I shouldn’t feel this violent need to protect her. It’s not in my nature. I take what I want, but *I don’t keep*.

And yet…

I reach out, fingers skimming the curve of her hip, tracing the bruises I left. The proof that she belongs to me.

She shifts again, pressing closer, her breath ghosting against my chest. A low growl rumbles in my throat.

Mine.

I watch her for a long time, the battle waging inside me. Do I let this happen? Or do I root it out before it can grow into something I don't understand?

If I let this feeling in and accept it, I know exactly what that means.

It means Lyra isn't just a possession anymore, she's a weakness.

And I don't have weaknesses.

At least, I didn't—until now.

* * *

SANTINO TAKES the chair across from my desk without hesitation or deference. Just smooth, unhurried confidence, like he's been sitting in that exact spot for decades.

Which, to be fair, he has.

He crosses one leg over the other, adjusts the cuffs of his three-button suit jacket, and gives me his usual calm, collected look.

He could be holding a smoking machine gun with a pile of bodies behind him, a brick of cocaine peeking out his pocket and the commissioner of the New York City police department right there with handcuffs already out, and he'd look just as unruffled.

Santino's been with my family longer than I've been alive, an old-school *consigliere* from a different era when deals were sealed with a handshake or a bullet, and loyalty meant you went into the *ground* before you talked.

That might make him a relic, but it doesn’t mean he’s out of touch. He’s survived this long because he’s smarter than any men who underestimated him.

He’s also, despite his calm demeanor and stylish suits, the toughest motherfucker in any room he enters. Even now, in his seventies.

The scars on his knuckles tell that story pretty clearly.

When I was a kid, I used to stare at his hands in fascination—at the crooked knuckle that had healed wrong after he broke it on a man’s face. I remember asking him once if it still hurt. He just laughed and said, *Carmy, pain is just proof you’re still in the fight.*

I allow myself a moment to admire the seriously *swank* suit he’s wearing. Santino always dresses like he just walked off stage at the Sands in 1962. He’s Frank Sinatra reincarnated, with a butterfly knife hidden in his jacket and gun up his sleeve. I’ve always suspected that’s half the reason my father has always listened to him.

The other half is that Santino understands this game better than anyone, and his loyalty to this family is absolute.

“What’ve you got for me today, Santino?”

He smooths a hand down his lapel, his cufflinks glinting in the dim light. “Word is there’s Russian movement in our territory. Not an attack yet. But testing. Feeling it out.”

I frown. “Not the Nikolayev Bratva—”

He snorts, shaking his head. “Kir wouldn’t be so obvious. No, these incursions are from the Ivanov family. However, Peter Ivanov's cousin, Matvey Kazurov, is—”

“One of Kir’s top *avtoritets*,” I finish for him, my gaze darkening. “So, either Kir’s getting a touch careless, or he just doesn’t give a fuck about subtlety anymore.” I drum my fingers on the edge of the desk. “Thoughts on how we respond?”

Santino tilts his head. “I was thinking, since you may or may not have influential Russian friends in certain…*unmentioned circles*…” He clears his throat delicately. “Perhaps you might have a conversation with them."

The room goes silent. My fingers stop moving.

Influential Russian friends.

Unmentioned circles.

It’s not exactly a state secret that I socialize with a few Bratva-connected Russians: Roman Nikitin, Bane Antonov, Laz Kislev, Mikhail Javanović, for example.

But the way he says it stops me cold.

It would appear Santino might have at least an idea about certain nocturnal activities of mine.

Activities involving an underground cathedral, a hound mask, and fighting the guilty…or chasing them through a maze.

I don’t say shit. I just raise a brow. “Is there something you’d like to ask me directly, Santino?”

He meets my gaze without hesitation. Then he smiles a small, knowing smile.

“I’ve spent my life learning to see what most don’t, Carmine. And what most hide.” His voice is quiet, calm. “I don’t think we need to continue this conversation any further, do you?”

I hold his gaze, letting the seconds tick by, until even Santino looks slightly unnerved.

Then I shake my head once.

“No, Santino, I think we’ve covered everything.”

He dips his chin, stands, buttons his jacket, and taps his fingers against the desk twice. “Just food for thought.” Then, smooth as ever, he turns and strides out, the door clicking shut behind him.

I stay still for a moment, processing.

It would appear the Black Court is not as invisible as we like to think. And sooner or later, someone's going to make the mistake of trying to pull back the mask.

I'm still mulling this over when there's a knock at the door and three of my capos enter for our scheduled meeting. They file in, taking their places and launching into updates on business, disputes, financials.

I should be listening, but my mind is elsewhere.

On *her*.

I shift, pulling my phone from my pocket and discreetly bringing up the security feeds. There she is.

Instantly my blood runs a little hotter, my dick twitching and thickening in my pants.

Lyra is moving naked through the bedroom, her skin covered in the evidence of last night. My bruises. My fingerprints. My fucking *claim*.

I watch her cross the room, her body achingly soft in the morning light. She disappears into the master bathroom, and I switch cameras, swiping the screen with practiced ease.

The feed changes.

She turns the water on, steam curling up immediately. She moves to the mirror, inspecting the bruises on her breasts and her neck. She reaches between her legs, checking the marks I left on her inner thigh, probably feeling a delicious ache from where my cock fucked her into submission last night.

She pulls her hair up, piling it on top of her head before stepping into the bath. The water parts around her, swallowing her inch by inch, the bubbles closing over her, hiding what I want to see.

I barely register the voices of my men anymore. All I see is her.

Her face tightens slightly as she lowers herself fully into the water. She's sore.

From me.

Heat flares low in my stomach as my fingers clench the phone. I should stop watching. I should focus.

I don't.

I can't.

Nothing in this world matters more than the woman in that bath.

And I don't give a fuck whom I have to kill to keep it that way.

* * *

THE DIVE BAR in Alphabet City smells like bleach and stale whiskey.

I glance over at the newly painted wall, the repaired chair, and the freshly washed spot on the floor which you would have no idea was where Marcus Chen got his head blown the fuck off last night.

Mikey Lucarelli and his crew are fucking *pros* when it comes to cleanup duty.

They've just left after a firm handshake and sizable wad of cash from yours truly, leaving me alone with Marcus' headless ghost.

The owners of Johnny's, the bar that Marcus' brains redecorated not twenty-four hours ago, were very familiar with the Barone name when I spoke to them earlier. They were also more than happy to look the other way, which is why *I* was more than happy to clean Marcus off the walls and give the place a new paint job.

I run my fingers over the edge of the glass in front of me, watching the whisky catch the dim light.

The front door swings open and Nico steps in, shaking the cold from his shoulders before making his way over to drop onto the stool beside me.

“Welcome to Johnny’s,” I deadpan. “We’re self-serve tonight.”

My brother shrugs, reaches over the bar and grabs a glass, then snags the bottle of questionable Scotch I’ve got on the bar top. He pours himself a drink, takes a sip, and makes a face.

“Carmy, you do realize you’re the head of one of the biggest Italian outfits in the country now, yeah?”

“Pretty sure I got that memo, yes.”

He eyes me. “Then why the *fuck* are you drinking this piss?”

“Because it’s best this shithole has,” I grunt. “Now, you said you had something?”

He chuckles, taking another sip of his drink anyway. Then he sets his phone down on the bar and brings up a series of photos.

Of Vera.

I’ve had Lyra’s mother followed since her freak-out before the wedding, when she was demanding money from Lyra.

What can I say. I don’t trust professional leeches.

Nico swipes through the photos showing Vera at a bar, watching what appears to be horse racing on the TV.

What a shocker.

Then something more interesting pops up. A man enters—clean-cut, cheap but well cared for suit. He sits next to Lyra’s mother, and the next photo shows her pushing a thumb drive his way.

I exhale slowly.

“Your instincts were good,” Nico growls. “This was earlier today." He stops on an image where the man is slipping the thumb drive into his pocket. “Looks like he gave her something in return.” Nico swipes to the next photo where the man is passing Vera a thick envelope. Which, yes, could be anything. Except Vera being *Vera*, it's no surprise when the *next* photos

show her opening it up and thumbing through the cash inside before the man tries to get her to put it away.

I zoom in on the clean-cut motherfucker in the cheap suit.

My jaw tightens.

“Am I the only one who thinks this fucker *screams* Feds?”

Nico leans back. “That’s what I thought at first, too. Except I had the guy followed after his meeting with Vera.”

I glance at him, waiting.

Nico picks up his glass, takes a sip, grimaces, then sets it down. He taps the phone again. “Guess who he had a meeting with next?”

Nico swipes to the next photo, and my eyes narrow viciously.

Kir Nikolayev.

I exhale through my nose in the silent bar, rolling my shoulders, forcing my pulse to remain steady. But my grip on the glass is tight.

“I don’t like coincidences,” I murmur.

“Neither do I,” Nico says, watching me. “But this isn’t a fucking coincidence.”

I lean back, swirling the rotgut in my glass, forcing my pulse to calm. “We need to find out what was on that drive.”

“Already working on it,” Nico says. “My guy’s tracing this asshole even as we speak. If he’s Bureau, we’ll know by tonight. But I doubt he is. Kir’s a lot of things, but an informant, or even someone who would *look* at the FBI, isn't one of them.”

We sit there in silence, my thoughts blackening by the second.

Vera may have thought she could move in the shadows.

But the thing about playing in the dark is…

The monsters lurking there always see you first.

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28

LYRA

I PEEL off my sweat-soaked leotard, sighing as the cool air kisses my overheated skin. Another long day.

Milena and Naomi are beside me, moving through their own post-rehearsal routines. I stayed behind in the studio for a while, working a troublesome transition, so they've both already showered. Milena is pulling on her clothes, while Naomi leans against the lockers, lazily sipping from her water bottle.

"So." Milena shoulders her bag, giving me a pointed look. "How's life as a *Barone*?"

Naomi snorts. "Yeah, what's it like living with him?"

There's a note of sympathy behind their words, as if they're waiting for me to tell them I'm miserable, drowning under the weight of a life I never wanted, bound to a man I didn't choose.

Instead…

I smile. Shyly. Worse, I blush.

Naomi's water bottle stops midair, her mouth open, ready to take a sip. Milena slowly turns, her sweater half-on.

"Oh *hell no*." Milena wriggles into her top, stepping closer. "Did you just *blush*?"

Naomi’s eyes scan my face like she’s trying to crack a secret code. “Oh my God,” she gasps quietly.

Milena lets out a slow exhale, clearly reevaluating everything she thought she knew about life. “Well…*huh*.”

I roll my eyes.

“Seriously though…” Milena frowns. “You're good?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“With…*Carmine*.” Naomi gulps. “Barone.”

“Are you seriously struggling this hard with the concept of me being happy with him?” I ask dryly.

“Yes,” Naomi and Milena say at the same time.

I sigh.

Naomi eyes me dubiously. “It’s just…” She shrugs. “You hear stories about him being kind of on the edgy side…

You don’t know the half of it, my friend…

“Like, classic mafia prince but also he’s hiding something.” Naomi makes a face. “I dunno. This girl Kelly that I know used to cocktail waitress at a club he’d go to all the time. Said she got serious serial killer vibes from him sometimes.”

“Serious serial killer vibes,” I deadpan back.

Naomi nods, paling slightly.

“As opposed to casual serial killer vibes.”

Naomi rolls her eyes before she chucks her wet towel at me. “Don’t be mean. You know what I'm saying.”

“So… What’s he *like*, then?” Milena cuts in.

I hesitate. How the hell do I explain Carmine?

How do I explain that he’s still terrifying, but doesn’t scare me anymore? That I feel safer in his hands than I ever have in my life?

“He’s…” I search for the right words. “Intense.”

Milena snorts. “*Understatement of the century*.”

Naomi grins hopefully. “Intense in a *good* way?”

My stomach flips, and I look away. God, I’ve got it bad.

“I should shower,” I say quickly, reaching for my towel. “You guys heading out?”

“We’ll wait for you,” Naomi chirps.

I shake my head. “Nah, don’t worry about it. I’m fine.”

Milena snickers. “She needs some time alone to flick the bean thinking about her psycho husband.”

I throw Naomi’s towel at Milena's head as Naomi giggles. “You done?”

Milena squints at me, fully aware I’m running from this conversation. “Yeah. But only for now.”

I roll my eyes again, laughing as they gather their things and head out, their voices echoing down the hall. The shower is a relief, washing away the sweat, the exhaustion, the lingering thoughts of Carmine that haunt my every waking moment. By the time I'm done, the changing room is empty, the rest of the theater quiet.

Then, I hear it.

Classical music, threading faintly through the silence like a ghost.

I pause, towel still in hand, listening. Then curiosity gets the best of me.

I slip on my clothes and shoulder my bag, then follow the sound to the small rehearsal studio room. When I get to the door, I pause when my eyes lock on the single dancer inside.

Dove Marchetti.

Fuck.

She's *really* good. I stand there, awestruck, watching her move with precision and total control, her line flawless. Her movements aren't just technically perfect, they're like little individual displays of creativity and physical poetry.

I keep watching until suddenly she pirouettes and ends up directly facing me—and here I am being a total psycho, lurking in the shadows right outside the door.

Shit.

She jolts a little when she sees me, her chest rising and falling with exertion. I hesitate for half a second before I step into the studio. "Sorry," I say, wincing. "Didn't mean to interrupt. Or, you know, be a total creep like that."

Dove shrugs, rolling her shoulders and running a hand over her silver-pink hair up in its bun. "It's fine. I was done anyway."

She's closed-off, but not necessarily in a snobby way. More armored than anything. Maybe a little distant. Like she doesn't trust easily.

"You're *really* good," I tell her.

She frowns, like she perceives it as a threat, not a compliment. "Look, I'm not trying to steal your friend Naomi's part," she says curtly. "I don't even know why Madame Kuzmina cast me as her understudy."

I smile warmly. "Because you're a beautiful dancer."

Dove watches me a second longer, then relaxes just a little, giving me a half-smile. Her brows knit. "You're married to Carmine Barone."

I nod. "Yeah."

She tilts her head. "Arranged?"

I grin. "Forced."

She sighs, rolling her eyes. "Let me guess, long story?"

I nod. “Pretty much. And complicated.”

“Yeah, mafia families are like that,” she says quietly, looking away.

She stretches her arms over her head, then adds casually, “I think my sister Ciara actually had a thing with him a while back. Carmine, that is.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut.

I don’t flinch, but something tightens in my chest. I feel it in my spine, in my fingers, coiling and curling under my ribs.

Jealousy. Sharp and sudden.

Dove notices immediately and lifts her hands. “Shit,” she says, watching me carefully. “You said it was a forced thing. I didn’t realize you and he were…” She frowns, her mouth twisting. “I'm sorry. I'm an okay dancer, but I’m an idiot socially.”

I exhale, forcing myself to relax. “No, it’s fine.”

She frowns curiously. “So, you two are like…real?”

I feel the heat creep over my face. Dove’s lips curl a little at the corners.

“Well…huh.”

I give her a curious look. “*Huh*?”

“It’s just… Most of the time these arranged things are fucking train wrecks. I mean, Ciara's in an arranged marriage, and I’m pretty sure she would legit kill the guy in his sleep.”

Maybe she should. And then she can go to prison, that fucking CUNT.

My conscience almost gives itself whiplash, staring at me like I’ve completely lost my mind.

“I’m…” Dove makes a face. “Seriously, sorry. That was a total dickhead thing for me to say.”

“It’s really fine,” I shrug as casually as I can right now. “We’re not…”

I pause.

We’re not *what*? Serious? A real couple? I don’t even know how to answer that question myself, so I shrug it away.

“All good,” I smile at her.

Dove shakes the last remnants of exertion from her muscles, pulls on a hoodie and track pants, and then exchanges her pointe shoes for sneakers. “I’m done for the night,” she says, shoving her gear in her bag. “You heading out too?”

I nod, and together, we make our way toward the back door. It’s late, the halls are dark, and the echoes of our footsteps bounce off the walls.

Just as we reach the exit, I groan as my hand slips into my pocket, finding it empty.

“*Shit*,” I mutter.

Dove glances at me. “What?”

“I keep leaving my phone in the change room.” I sigh, rolling my shoulders. “You go ahead.”

“You sure?”

I nod. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

She gives me a small smile. More genuine than the earlier ones, like she’s finally warming up to me. “It was nice talking to you, Lyra.”

I smile back. “You too.”

Dove pushes open the door and steps out, the night swallowing her up. Then the door clicks shut behind her.

I turn on my heel and make my way back to the dressing room. The hallway feels longer this time, and a strange, uneasy feeling prickles up the back of my neck. I push it down. It’s just the late hour and the fact that I’m here alone.

I sigh when I spot my phone right where I left it. But something’s different.

My pulse skips.

My phone is sitting on top of a manila envelope that wasn't there before.

…With my *name* written across the front.

What. The. *Fuck*.

No one else is here. It's just been Dove and I talking in the studio, and the doors to the building are locked.

And yet, the envelope is here.

Haltingly, I force my feet to move. My fingers shake as I reach for my phone, lifting it gently and carefully, as if touching it might set something off.

I stare at the envelope for a moment, willing myself to pretend I never saw it, to turn around and leave. But I don't.

I can't.

With a deep breath, I finally pick it up, unseal it and tip out the contents.

It's photographs: a whole stack of them, thick, glossy prints. I focus on the first one, and suddenly my stomach drops as my blood turns to ice.

They're photos of my father's crime scene in our basement.

I drop them like they're on fire, my hand flying to my mouth to muffle the scream threatening to spill out of me. The photos scatter across the bench and the floor, black and white images of things I've spent my entire life trying to forget.

Cages.

Chains.

Bloodstains. Fingernail marks on the wall.

The pretty dresses, hanging neatly in a row on a metal rack.

I clench my eyes shut, my body locking up, my breath coming in sharp, panicky bursts.

No.

No. No. NO…

My vision blurs, my pulse hammering so hard it feels like I'm going to split open.

A shadow I thought I’d buried long ago shifts inside me, uncoiling and wrapping itself around my heart, dark and suffocating.

The walls feel like they’re closing in, pressing, crushing, swallowing me whole.

I want to run. But I can’t.

I’m trapped in his past.

Trapped in mine.

And there’s no way out.

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CARMINE

THE CAR ROARS through the streets.

I drive like a man possessed, barely registering the other vehicles that swerve out of my way. My phone sits on the console beside me, the screen glaring up at me blankly. But it doesn't hold the answers I need. I never put live cameras in Lyra's dressing room.

That was a fucking oversight, and I’m paying for it now.

I watched her earlier, talking alone with that other dancer in the small rehearsal studio. I watched them head for the exit together. But then Lyra jogged back to the dressing room alone.

And then there was nothing.

I watched the fucking door for twenty minutes. Thirty. Thirty-*five*.

Then something snapped inside me.

And that brings me to my current near-suicidal driving through the city, my pulse thundering in my ears.

The car screeches to a stop in the alley behind the Mercury Theater. I lurch out, gun drawn as I storm to the back door and punch in the code I’ve watched Lyra use before.

I don’t know what the fuck I’m walking into, just that I’m ready to kill.

I move fast, surging through the empty halls, my jaw set. I kick open the door to the dressing room…

…And everything in me—every scream, every demon, every impulse to rip out a throat and spill blood across the world—goes quiet.

She's huddled on the floor, back pressed to the lockers, arms wrapped around her knees, rocking slightly. Her haunted gaze stabs into nothingness in front of her, eyes unfocused like she's somewhere else entirely.

Around her, the floor is littered with photographs.

What the fuck.

I go straight to her, dropping to my knees, my heart pounding so hard it's deafening. I grab her shoulders, shaking her gently, then harder.

"Lyra."

No response.

"LYRA."

Still nothing.

Her breathing is rapid, her chest rising and falling in sharp, shallow gasps like she's having a panic attack. Like this is a dissociative state so deep I don't even know if she realizes she's still breathing.

Her eyes flicker, as if she's staring at something far away.

I look down.

The photos are everywhere, spread out in sharp, glossy bursts of horror.

Jesus fucking Christ.

I've seen the subject matter before: they're shots of Arkadi's little shop of horrors beneath the unassuming suburban home Lyra grew up in.

How did a monster like that bring someone like her into the world?

Rage boils up my spine, but I shove it down. She needs me.

She’s shaking now, her body rocking, lips murmuring something I can’t hear. Her nails dig into her arms, like she’s trying to ground herself but failing.

I can’t let her disappear.

I haul her into my arms, holding her so tight I feel the tremors racing through her.

“Breathe deep, baby,” I murmur, voice rough, commanding.

She doesn’t.

She can’t.

I move fast, bolting straight to the showers. I charge to one of the showerheads, step under, and slam the water on full force.

Ice-cold spray hammers down on us, soaking my shirt, plastering her hair to her face.

Her body jerks in my arms, fingers twitching against my chest, breath catching violently in her throat.

Her eyes go wide, haunted and broken, but she’s still not here.

I cradle the back of her head, bringing her closer, forcing her to feel the solid weight of me holding her together.

“*Look at me, Lyra,*” I snarl.

She doesn’t even blink.

“LOOK AT ME!”

Still nothing.

No.

I *will not* let her slip away from me.

My hand moves to her throat, wrapping around it tight enough to feel the frantic pulse beneath my palm, tight enough to remind her she’s here. That I’m here.

But no.

She’s still somewhere else. Lost.

My grip tightens, but her eyes don’t focus.

Then I shift, dropping my hand lower, over the curve of her chest. My fingers find the puckered peak through her soaked hoodie and shirt. I pinch hard, twisting her nipple.

She gasps out a tiny, fragile sound, but her eyes remain distant—flickering somewhere beyond me.

Fuck.

I push my hand lower, slipping my fingers into the waistband of her drenched yoga pants. Then my hand slips into her panties and cups her pussy as the water begins to turn warmer. My fingers drift between her lips, rubbing in slow, familiar circles.

Nothing at first.

Then there’s a sharp hitch in her breath. A shiver rolls through her.

Better. But not enough.

I sink two fingers inside her, curling them deep, pressing into her heat as my palm grinds against her clit, unrelenting.

Lyra’s entire body jerks and a sharp whimper escapes her lips—hitting me like a live wire, sending dark victory curling through my veins.

That got through.

She’s still blinking slowly, still slipping in and out of whatever fucking void she’s fallen into, but at least she’s reacting now.

I curl my fingers, rubbing her g-spot, my other hand gripping the back of her neck, forcing her forehead to mine.

I won’t stop until she comes back to me.

Until she sees me.

My fingers keep moving, my grip on her tight and possessive, my lips brushing against her temple as I growl against her damp skin.

“You feel that?” I rasp. “That’s me. That’s *us*.”

Her fingers clutch at my shirt, her breath still shaky and uneven.

I press deeper, forcing her to react, to feel, to remember.

Suddenly, she gasps. Her hand flies up, her nails dig into my arms, and her eyes snap to mine.

Wide. Wild. Finally fucking present.

Her breath stutters against my throat, her fingers clutching my soaking-wet shirt like she’s afraid I’ll disappear. Like she needs something solid to hold on to.

In any other situation, you’d need the armed fucking forces to remove my fingers from her sweet little cunt. But in this case, I slip my hand from her panties, grabbing her hip instead. I grip the back of her neck with my other hand, my fingers anchoring her firmly in place. “It’s me,” I growl. “You’re safe.”

She blinks, her pupils still too dilated, her body trembling. But she hears me now. She’s back.

I exhale slowly, forcing my own pulse to even out. “What the fuck happened?” I murmur.

Her lips part, but no sound comes out.

I'm not letting her fade again. I tighten my hold, my grip on her jaw commanding. “Someone gave you those photos?”

She nods furtively.

“*Who*,” I snarl.

She shakes her head, water trailing down her cheeks like tears.

“Why the *fuck* would anyone send you those?” My voice drops lower, harsher. I need to know. I need names. I need a target for my wrath.

“I—”

“Lyra, think. Who—”

“I was the star witness in Arkadi’s case.”

The whole fucking world stops.

My breath stills, my arms locked around her as my blood turns molten.

I remember the news clips when it all happened—how the neighbors called the cops after they found that monster’s own daughter running screaming through the neighborhood, sobbing about “girls in the basement".

Lyra.

I remember how later Arkadi’s own wife was exempt from testifying—firstly because her lawyers were able to prove she was mentally unfit to take the witness stand, given her mental state and her alcoholism. When the prosecution threw a fit, the same lawyers hit back with “spousal testimonial immunity”.

Lyra swallows hard, her voice breaking as she looks up at me. “My testimony sealed his conviction. It’s what sent him to prison.”

That can’t be. As I recall, there was never anything about Lyra being a witness of any kind. I mean she was a *child*, for fuck’s sake.

“It was sealed,” she whispers, seeing the question in my eyes. “Because I was a minor.” Her voice shakes. “I wasn’t going to testify, because of who my father worked for. But then Kir came to see my mother and me during the trial. He told us that no retribution would come from the Bratva if I testified. They had excommunicated my father for his crimes. Kir made it clear that if I testified—and that he thought I should—I’d be safe.”

Kir.

Raw, blood-soaked viciousness snarls inside me.

Kir was the one who put her in that courtroom and made her face that monster.

I see. Fucking. *Red*. But I force it down. For her.

I drag in a slow breath, pressing my lips to her wet forehead, grounding myself in the feel of her.

“Tell me about the past.” My voice is low. I need to know everything.

She hesitates, but only for a second. Then it all starts pouring out.

“I always knew about the door in the basement,” she whispers. “But it was always locked, and my father always told me it was just an old storm cellar. Then one day, when I went downstairs to do laundry, it was open a crack.”

I stay silent, my fingers stroking her back, willing her to continue.

Her breath stalls. “So, I… I went through it, and down the stairs.” She chokes a small, broken laugh. “I thought… I don’t even know. I thought maybe I’d find something interesting down there, a piece of our family history or something.”

Her fingers curl against my chest, clinging, desperate.

“I saw the cages. The chains. The handcuffs. The row of girls’ clothing on a rack.”

My entire body goes tense.

Her voice drops lower. “There were cameras. Lights. Like it was a movie set.”

Holy fucking hell.

“I heard…”

She squeezes her eyes shut against the memory.

“I heard him,” she chokes out. Her head shakes violently. “I’ll never forget the sound, like someone slapping raw meat.”

She swallows hard.

“I walked in on him, raping…” She clings to me like a life raft in a stormy sea. “*Sophia Ferguson*,” she croaks, her voice distant. “He was choking her while…” She stops.

I hold her tightly as her eyes squeeze shut.

“She died before the cops got there. I don’t even know if she was still alive when I saw her.”

Jesus Christ.

Lyra was *fourteen fucking years old* when she saw that.

I think I know now why she only reads porn. Why watching sex turns her into a husk. Why me making her look at that couple at Doomsday turned the light off behind her eyes.

I hold her tighter, my hands fisting her wet clothes, cradling her in my arms.

I want to destroy everything. Burn the whole world down. She’s *mine*, and I’ll erase every single ghost that dares to touch her. Every single fucking monster.

Except me.

For her, I’ll be the darkest motherfucking monster the world has ever known.

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CARMINE

I WATCH MY PREY EAT.

He looks like a man who has all the time in the world. He cuts his steak with unhurried precision, the knife slicing easily through the meat before the fork lifts the bite to his lips.

The dim glow of the restaurant catches the deep red of his wine as he picks up the glass, swirling it slightly before taking a sip.

He's alone. No men at his table.

Anyone else would see this and assume stupidity or carelessness.

But as angry as I am with him right now, I'm aware that neither of those words remotely applies to Kir Nikolayev.

Eating alone isn't carelessness on his part. It's a power move. A dare.

…One that I've just accepted.

I stalk toward him, moving through the crowded restaurant like a shadow, silent and lethal. My steps are slow, deliberate.

Kir lifts his fork, takes another bite. Chews. Swallows. I close the distance, my hand drifting to the blade in my coat pocket.

Just as I reach him, his voice cuts through the hum of conversation. Kir doesn't turn around at all. Doesn't react beyond the faint smirk curving his lips. He just lifts his wine glass and takes a slow sip.

"Ah, waiter—good, you're here. The steak is closer to medium than I ordered. Also, would you be so kind as to tell me this evening's dessert list."

I freeze for a moment, then move past him, stepping into view on the other side of the table. He sets his glass down, finally meeting my gaze. His brows lift slightly. Then he clears his throat.

Instantly, the entire restaurant shifts.

The music stops. Conversations die.

Every patron turns toward us, some getting up, some simply watching with quiet attentiveness.

They're *all* Kir's people.

Even the staff begin to pull back their jackets, revealing glimpses of holstered guns. The waiters, the bartenders—every single one of them, armed.

I lift a brow as I turn back to Kir. "The famous Russian flair for dramatics," I growl.

Kir's smirk widens but remains cold. "Please. You're the one looming over my dinner like an impatient assassin."

I ignore the jab, my hand still resting lightly on my pocket. "I'm confident I could cut your throat before any of them got to me."

Kir leans back in his chair, adjusting his cuffs.

"Maybe," he muses, "but *I'm* confident you're not the first man to threaten me or my jugular. Almost as confident as I am that if you take one more step right now it will be your last."

Kir cocks a brow, his smirk sharpening like a blade.

"Why don't we stop pretending we're still down-in-the-trenches brawlers and accept that we're both kings now."

His gaze flicks to my pocket, then back to me.

“And kings never fight each other hand to hand. That’s what they have armies for.”

Kir tilts his head, indicating the seat opposite him.

“Sit, Carmine.”

I bristle.

Kir clears his throat again. “*Please*,” he adds with a dramatic sigh, almost as an afterthought.

My jaw tight, I pull out the chair and lower myself into it.

Kir raises a hand. Instantly, one of his men appears, bringing over another glass.

Kir pours wine from the bottle of 1999 Petrus Pomerol on his table—the kind of nine-thousand-dollar bottle you drink when you want to remind the world that you *can*.

He slides the glass across the table toward me. “I assume you’re not here for the steak,” he says dryly. “Although it’s quite excellent. I was joking before about the temperature being off.”

I lean forward, voice low. “I’m not here for the Yelp reviews,” I growl. “I’m here about my fucking *wife*.”

Kir exhales slowly, swirling the wine in his glass, watching me over the rim. "You’ll have to be more specific, Carmine. What exactly about your lovely bride has you so wound up?"

“You pushed her onto the witness stand against Arkadi,” I say thinly.

Kir lifts a brow, mild amusement flickering across his face. “Tell me—do you always get this possessive about the past, or just when it involves her?”

Something violent and dangerous coils in my chest.

Kir leans back, finally taking a sip of his wine. “Relax, Carmine.” His voice is unfazed, smooth. “I didn’t push her. I simply informed her—and her mother—that if she testified, the Bratva wouldn’t stop her. Nor would there be any…*repercussions*…from my end.” He swirls the wine again, watching

the way the deep red coats the glass before setting it down. “Ultimately, the choice was hers.”

I grit my teeth. “She was a fucking child.”

Kir shrugs. “And Arkadi was a fucking monster.” He clears his throat. “To get to the point, yes, Lyra’s father worked for me. A mid-level enforcer. He did some muscle work for me…ran a few shipping operations… collections.” Kir’s eyes turn icy. “When his crimes came to light, he was instantly excommunicated from my organization.”

Kir leans forward slightly. His voice drops.

“I might run a criminal organization, Carmine. But we all have a line we don’t cross.” He taps the stem of his glass. “Mine happens to be kidnapping and locking teenage girls in a basement to rape, torture and kill them.” His tone is detached. Almost bored. But there’s danger behind it.

I watch him, cataloging every shift in his expression. For the first time since sitting down, I'm wondering if we have more in common than I care to admit.

“You should know something else about him, though,” Kir adds, looking into his wine, his brow furrowing like he’s dredging deep for something.

“Which is?” I ask, leaning forward.

“I’ve read all about his crimes: interviews he gave in prison, psych analysis, all of it. The Bratva world, me included, knew Arkadi as bruiser and enforcer—a tough guy who could get things done.” He shakes his head. “But it’s clear now that he was *much* more than that.”

His eyes lift to mine, dark and steady.

“His intelligence scores were off the charts. It’s all in his psych evaluation from prison. Genius-level IQ, highly adept at solving complex problems, and if you read between the lines, you can tell the psychiatrist speaking with him was more than slightly afraid of him.”

Kir frowns, shaking his head again. Then he exhales sharply.

“People like to tell themselves that Arkadi was just another violent man, a foot soldier who cracked one day, decided he enjoyed hurting people, and then made a hobby out of it.” His lips press to a thin line. “That’s comforting, isn’t it? To think that monsters are made, not born?”

He pauses and takes a sip of wine.

“But Arkadi wasn’t some dumb enforcer who lost his way.” Kir’s voice is flat now, his words stripped of their amusement. “That was just his cover. That’s what he *wanted* us to think.”

My fingers tighten around my glass. “What are you saying?”

Kir looks straight into my eyes. “I’m saying that everything Arkadi did—the tough guy act, the reckless brutality, the brawler reputation—was all an elaborate fucking mask. The real Arkadi was the man beneath it that no one ever saw. The cold, calculating monster who was always two steps ahead of everyone else.”

Something heavy settles in my chest, a weight I can’t shift.

“Arkadi *never* made mistakes,” Kir continues. “Every move he made was deliberate. Every crime, every kill—all perfectly orchestrated.” He leans back in his chair, swirling his glass again. “Except for one slipup.”

My jaw clenches. “The open basement door.”

Kir nods slowly. “Just a crack. Just enough for a curious girl to wander inside.”

I stare at him, something cold crawling down my spine.

“You’re suggesting that wasn’t an accident.”

After a moment, Kir tilts his head slightly, studying me. “Arkadi was meticulously careful. He never gave the wrong people the wrong information. Never left a single trace. Until that one time.”

The silence hangs heavy between us. I can feel the weight of what he isn’t saying pressing on my ribs, almost suffocating me.

Kir exhales slowly, swirling his glass again, the deep red wine catching the dim light. “His mistake wasn’t leaving the door open.” His voice is lower now, almost grim. “His mistake was thinking she’d see what was inside and choose to walk the same path as him.”

I don’t move, don’t blink.

Kir leans forward slightly, elbows resting on the table. “Maybe, in some twisted part of his mind, Arkadi hoped Lyra would see what he was and accept it. Maybe he thought she was just like him.” He tilts his head. “Maybe he thought she’d *stay*.”

The words hit like a slow-moving bullet. A father expecting his daughter to follow him willingly into the darkness of the abyss.

“But she didn’t.” Kir’s lips curl slightly, bitterness in his expression. “She ran.”

I flex my fingers against the table, my jaw tightening.

“At the trial,” Kir goes on, “he never looked at her. Never spoke to her. Never tried to explain himself or apologize. *Nothing*.” His eyes darken. “Because he knew.” He sets his glass down carefully, deliberately. “For the first time in his life, Arkadi wasn’t the one holding the power. She was. And I don’t think for a minute he ever, *ever* let that go.”

I exhale slowly, forcing the tension from my shoulders. “Well, he’s in the ground now, where he belongs.”

Kir doesn’t respond immediately. He just watches me, tapping one long finger against the stem of his glass. Finally he puffs out a breath, clearly considering whether or not to say what’s on the tip of his tongue.

I don’t like that look.

I peer at him. “What?”

Kir shrugs, inclining his head slightly. “It’s just, men like Arkadi have a way of…” His eyes shift side to side. “*Lingering*.”

A chill slowly ripples through me. “The fuck does that mean?”

Kir takes another sip, his eyes flicking to mine. “Some men cast long shadows,” he murmurs. “Even from the grave.”

Something dark slithers between us, snaking up my spine.

I watch him carefully, waiting for him to say more. Instead, he sits back in his chair, fingers tapping absently against his glass, letting the words sink in.

He’s not talking about ghosts.

He’s implying Arkadi Ostrov *might not be one*.

I exhale, rubbing a hand over my jaw. “You sound like a fucking conspiracy nut.”

Kir smirks, lifting a brow. “The type to listen to Marcus Chen’s podcast?”

My head snaps up. Kir watches me, his smirk deepening.

I lean closer, voice lowering. “If you have something to say, Kir, I would suggest *just saying it*.”

He takes his time finishing his wine, then sets the glass down, tapping one finger against the rim.

“We have our differences, Carmine,” he says, his voice even. “But I think we can find common ground in that we both want Lyra safe.”

No. Kir doesn’t get to want her safe.

That’s *my* fucking job.

I shift in my seat, resting my forearms on the table, but there’s nothing casual about my posture. The space between us crackles with unspoken violence.

I don’t like how he’s steering this conversation, leading me around like he holds all the fucking cards.

“If you think Arkadi is somehow not dead,” I say, voice dropping to a low, lethal snarl, “I would suggest expanding on that theory, *now*. Or we’ll see

just how worthwhile it was for you to book out a whole restaurant for your guards."

Kir's smirk fades—just a fraction, but I catch it. Good.

"That is *not* what I'm saying," he fires back, his voice sharper now. His eyes glint coldly. "I'm saying I, of all people, understand that the past doesn't always stay there."

"If you have any information," I snarl, "and you don't share it with me right now, and if any harm whatsoever comes to Lyra because of that omission, you will never take another shower, lay your head on another pillow, or walk into a room without the lights already on without wondering if I'm lurking. Waiting for you."

Kir's eyes narrow. The tension between us pulls razor-thin, close to snapping.

He exhales slowly, setting his glass down carefully, deliberately. "Don't threaten me at dinner, Carmine."

"I don't like how involved you were in her life." My voice is low, lethal. "I don't like that you're *still* involved."

Kir tilts his head slightly and smiles, dangerously amused.

"Well, *I* don't like that you put on animal masks and play vigilante court at night, but *here we are*."

The room goes pin-drop silent.

The words hang in the air like a knife at a throat, poised to sink in.

"But since you obviously care for her," he finally says, "I'm going to pretend for now that I don't know that."

Tension coils tight in my shoulders, but I stay silent.

"Instead," Kir continues, his voice dropping lower, sharper, "I'm going to give you some advice."

My gaze is steely. "I don't need your fucking advice."

His smile doesn’t waver. “Mind your own house, Carmine.”

I exhale through my nose, rolling my shoulders, forcing myself to stay in control. “What the fuck does that mean?”

Kir takes his time, flicking a glance to his men, then back to me. “Your mother-in-law met with someone the other day. She sold him something.”

I glare at him. “Yeah, she met with *your* man. She sold *him* something.”

Kir laughs coldly. “Not my man, believe me.” His smile fades.

“Well, he went to *you* later,” I growl, voice like iron.

Kir nods. “Indeed.”

“And?” I press.

Instead of giving a response Kir just straightens.

“*And* I believe I’m done with my meal, Carmine. Which means it’s time to leave.”

Suddenly, four of his men are at my back, surrounding me.

I push back from the table, standing slowly, even though my body is screaming to move. To act.

This isn’t over.

Not by a long shot.

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LYRA

DARK BRUISES BLOOM across my skin. A dull throb lingers between my legs. I trace my fingers over the angry welts on my wrists, the faint indentations from his hands on my hips, the bite marks dotting my inner thighs and breasts.

Every inch of me is sore.

And yet, I smile.

It shouldn't feel this good to be this destroyed.

Carmine is stretched out beside me, looking completely relaxed, like he didn't just chase me down, tackle me to the ground, and fuck me like he was staking a claim on my very bones. His bruises match mine, shadowing his ribs, his forearms—scratches on his jaw, where I got him with my nails.

I exhale slowly, pressing a cool cloth to a particularly dark bruise on my ribs, wincing. Jesus. I might need to start taking a first aid course if I'm going to keep having sex with this man.

"You look pleased with yourself," I mutter, side-eyeing him as he reaches for his phone on the nightstand.

Carmine smirks, not even looking up as he scrolls. "And? Shouldn't I be?"

Rolling my eyes, I lean back against the pillows, my skin still humming.

"I want to go out," I say suddenly.

Carmine finally looks up from his phone. “Out?”

“Yeah.” I push my hair back, watching him. “A date. You know—like a normal couple.”

I feel like an idiot the second I say it. It sounds so needy and pathetic. Instantly, I wish I could take it back, but it’s out there.

Carmine’s expression doesn’t change. If anything, he looks almost bored. “I don’t date.”

“Unless it’s Ciara Marchetti.”

Well, that's out there too.

Good thing I wasn’t hanging on to it or anything since Dove said it the other night.

Carmine’s brow arches. His smirk deepens as he glances up at me. “Jealous much, little dancer?”

I bristle, scowling. I hate that he looks so entertained.

“Tell me,” I snap. “How many?”

His eyes blaze. He’s enjoying this far more than he should. “How many what?”

I cross my arms. “How many women have you done this with?”

He frowns as he tosses his phone aside and rolls to face me, stretching out like a jaguar.

“Done *what*, specifically? Marrying them when my father steps down—”

“You know what the hell I mean,” I mutter.

Carmine leans in, voice dropping. “Do you imagine that I frequently find women who enjoy the idea of me chasing them down and fucking them senseless?”

Before my mouth can open with a simple “yes”, he reaches over and cups my jaw, pressing my lips together with his thumb.

“Answer that as if you were *not* the sort of woman who actively craves that.”

My face heats instantly.

His smirk sharpens. “You’re the first.”

I huff, feeling petulant now. “Her sister said you had a thing with Ciara.”

Carmine tosses me an unimpressed look. “I never once touched Ciara Marchetti, despite what people around me seem to believe. We grew up in adjoining mafia families. That’s all.”

I search his face, trying to see if he’s lying. But Carmine isn’t the type to lie. He’d rather let the truth burn you alive.

I exhale, letting it go. *For now*. “Still… I want a date.”

Carmine rolls his eyes. “I told you: I don’t date, Lyra.”

“Well, there’s a first time for everything?”

He gives me a look, and I grin.

“Tell you what. Take me on a real date, and I’ll let you chase me like a lunatic and fuck me like a monster.”

Carmine raises an unimpressed brow. “You mean like I literally just did.”

I giggle, shaking my head. “I mean I’ll let you do it again.” I shift closer, pressing my lips to the corner of his mouth. “And again, and again…” My breath hitches, a thrill shooting through me. “And I think you’d like it if I *begged*…”

Predatory lust flashes behind his eyes.

I have him now.

“So,” I murmur, brushing my lips over his jaw. “Take me on a date, husband.”

A slow, dangerous smirk spreads across his lips. “Fine.” His voice is a low rasp against my skin. “But don’t think I’ll go easy on you.”

* * *

LAUGHTER HUMS AROUND ME, warm and easy, the air heavy with whiskey, sweat and sawdust from the ax-throwing lanes across the room. The bar is dim, packed with bodies, the steady thud of axes hitting wooden targets mixing with the background chatter of a basketball game playing on the TVs.

I shift in Carmine's lap, his hands tightening automatically around my waist. His fingers dig into my hips like he doesn't even realize he's doing it. I sip my drink, my body still aching in the most delicious ways from our earlier chase.

This feels *weirdly* normal, given who my husband is.

It also feels really, really good.

Across the table, Bianca leans into Kratos, laughing at something he's murmured in her ear. Roman sits beside them, his date—a blonde girl whose name I don't remember—chattering away while he barely acknowledges her. His gaze flicks up sharply when three people suddenly emerge from the crowd and step over to our corner table.

"Relax, I'm here. You can all start having fun now."

Bianca and I roll our eyes as we turn to look up at Vaughn. A blonde girl I've never seen before is on his left arm.

A brunette that I *also* don't recognize is on his right one.

Vaughn shakes them off before extending a tattooed hand to Kratos. Bianca's husband grins, standing and grabbing Vaughn's hand before bringing him in for a bear hug.

"Long time, man," Kratos rumbles. "What've you been up to?"

"Oh, you know," Vaughn shrugs. "Making sure your wife doesn't get into trouble at rehearsal."

Kratos grins. "That's a tough job. My thanks and condolences."

Bianca rolls her eyes, grinning.

Vaughn turns to Carmine and me, his brows arching as he takes in the sight of me sitting on my husband’s lap with his arm around my waist.

He smirks. Then his eyes lift to Carmine's. “Don Barone. I come to you on the day your daughter is to be wed—”

“*The Godfather*. Very clever,” Carmine deadpans. “I’ve never heard that before, growing up in an Italian mafia family. Literally. Not once.”

Vaughn grins. “So, like, how does this work? Do I kiss your ring, or—”

“I’d really rather you didn’t.”

“High five?”

Carmine shrugs. “Sure.”

I laugh as Carmine and Vaughn do just that. It's so weirdly…*normal*.

“Mr. Nikitin,” Vaughn’s smile curls dangerously, his brow cocking as he turns to Roman.

“You keeping my sister out of trouble, too?” Roman grunts.

“Evie?” Vaughn grins. “Don't have to. She's a fucking nun.”

Vaughn’s two dates slide back into his arms as he nods his chin at Roman and the blonde sitting next to him. “Who’s your date?”

“Angela,” the blonde grins, blushingly holding out a hand, like Vaughn’s going to kiss it. Let’s be real, that’s not outside the realm of possibly when it comes to Vaughn, but on this occasion, he ignores it.

“Want to ditch your date and join our party instead?” he purrs.

Roman’s brow furrows as he glances at Angela and then glares at Vaughn. “The fuck is your problem?”

“Relax,” Vaughn grins, looking right at Roman. “I was talking to you, not her.”

I snort. Bianca turns to hide her giggle in Kratos' shoulder. Roman scowls, his face darkening.

"Yeah, *pass*."

"Why?"

Roman's brows knit as he stares up at Vaughn. "Because I'm *straight*?"

Vaughn's lips curl devilishly into a hungry grin. "Now who told you my favorite dirty talk?"

"*Jesus Christ*," Roman grunts, rolling his eyes and shaking his head as Vaughn blows him an air kiss, then drags his two dates to an empty spot around the table.

I glance around. "I'll grab the next round. What's everyone want?"

I stand as they all shout at once. Carmine's hands stay on me until the last second, and after he reluctantly releases me I weave through the crowd toward the bar.

I order from the bartender and lean against the counter, waiting, tapping my nails against the wood. The TV above the bar flickers, but I don't pay much attention. It's been basketball all night. Yawn.

I collect the drinks and turn back toward the group—

And something in the air shifts.

There's a sudden silence at the table even before I get there. Bianca and Kratos have gone still. Roman's jaw is clenched, and Vaughn's easy grin has faded.

And then I see Carmine.

His entire body is rigid, eyes glued to the screen above the bar behind me.

Something cold slithers down my spine. Before I can stop myself I turn, just as the bartender turns up the volume and people crowd around the bar.

"To recap our breaking news, authorities have discovered a hidden underground bunker beneath a rented single family home in Newark, New

Jersey, which bears striking similarities to the infamous lair of convicted serial killer and rapist Arkadi Ostrov.”

No.

“Inside the bunker, police recovered the bodies of two young women. Restraints, cages, and professional-grade recording equipment were also found, mirroring the chilling setup in Ostrov’s previous crimes. Investigators say this new discovery could substantiate the claims made by missing conspiracy podcaster Marcus Chen, who has repeatedly suggested that Ostrov may not, in fact, be dead.”

The world tilts.

The drinks in my hands crash to the floor in an explosion of shattered glass.

No.

No, no, no.

“*Dude, I swear, that’s fucking HER.*”

“*Oh my God, the* Ostrova *chick?*”

“*What, here?!*”

“*Holy shit, get a picture! That’s totally her!*”

Carmine is already cutting through the crowd as they all turn to stare at me.

I stumble back. I don’t even know why I’m running, just know that I can’t breathe, and I need air.

I shove through the doors, the cool night air hitting me like a slap, my pulse a thumping drumbeat in my ears. My hands shake and my vision blurs as I brace against the wall outside.

This can’t be real.

Arkadi's fucking *dead*.

I almost scream when my phone buzzes. I flinch, yanking it out of my pocket and staring down at the text message.

My blood turns to ice.

The text is from the same anonymous number.

UNKNOWN

Tick tock, Lyra. Find concrete evidence linking Carmine to the Black Court or your mother suffers.

The next text is a photo of my mother, asleep on the couch in my old apartment, a newspaper with today's date lying next to her.

My hand flies to my mouth and my pulse slams against my ribs as one more text comes through.

UNKNOWN

You have 72 hours…moya dorogaya doch'.

I have only a vague idea that Carmine is bellowing my name before everything goes black.

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CARMINE

LYRA SLEEPS as if she’s still running.

Her breath is slow, but every so often, a twitch jolts through her and I watch her brow furrow and her lips part with a soft, barely-there murmur. Like her body doesn't realize that she’s safe now.

I exhale, running a hand over my jaw, tension still wound tight beneath my skin. I knew the news would hit her hard. I knew the second I looked up and saw the bar TVs switch from the game to the breaking news, saw the images of the bunker on the screen.

But I wasn’t expecting her to shut down completely like this.

She looks fragile curled up against the sheets, her breathing steady but too shallow, like part of her is still bracing for impact.

A dangerous, possessive feeling roars through me. I remember thinking before that this is something I have never felt for anyone but family. But it's even stronger than that. This cuts into my very skin and burns like fire.

My phone vibrates against the nightstand.

THE STAG

I’m here.

I glance at Lyra one last time before sliding off the bed.

The house is silent as I make my way downstairs and into the backyard, along the narrow stone path that leads to the rose garden my mother, Giada, loved to care for so much.

It’s getting overgrown these days, the blooms tangled together in a way that’s more wild than elegant. I frown. I should fix that.

The Stag is waiting for me.

He stands just beyond the roses, half in shadow, his hands in his coat pockets. Motionless. Patient.

He doesn’t rush into conversation. Doesn’t even move until I’m close enough for the moonlight to catch his features, angling across his face.

He’s who I called when this all went down. Because there are questions that need to be answered. Now. And he excels at this sort of work.

“I went to exhume the fucker myself,” he says as casually as mentioning going to the grocery store. “Just to be sure.”

My jaw tightens. “And?”

He lifts his chin slightly, eyes locked on mine. “It appears Arkadi was cremated.”

“That’s it?” I murmur hollowly. “That’s all you found?”

He lifts his shoulders. “Wish there was more to tell you. But there was nothing suspicious about his death,” The Stag continues. “He was stabbed in his cell during the night by a gang member already doing four life sentences.” His mouth twists slightly. “Who bragged about it after.”

Of course he did. That’s a badge of honor behind bars.

The Stag pulls a piece of paper from his pocket and hands it to me. It's the medical examiner’s report of Arkadi’s passing: death by multiple stab wounds and massive blood loss. Signed, I’s dotted, T’s crossed.

I glance back at him. “That bunker they talked about on the news tonight. The two dead girls…”

The Stag nods slowly, his eyes stabbing into mine unblinkingly.

“The world is full of bad people,” he growls. “People who feel even less than you and I do.” He smirks slightly. “Copycats happen. Dahmer had easily a dozen.”

I watch him for a long moment before I nod. “Thanks.”

“Happy to help.” He nods past me up at the house, the sounds of the city humming around us. “How is she?”

“She’ll be fine.”

The Stag nods. Then, without another word, he turns and slips back into the shadows, disappearing into the night.

I make my way back inside, threading through the darkened halls, up the stairs.

Lyra is still sleeping, now curled up on my side of the bed, as if she reached for me in my absence.

I slip in beside her, watching the way her lashes flutter slightly and her fingers clutch at the fabric of the pillow.

She stirs, her body shifting under the sheets before her eyes slowly open and then find mine. The fear is still there, buried deep. A silent war behind her gaze.

I brush my knuckles along her jaw. “He’s confirmed dead. He’s *gone*, little dancer.”

I pull her closer, letting her head rest against my chest. She exhales, all the tension in her body finally unwinding.

Her monster might be slain. But now, I’m going to remove the last of his claws still stuck in her skin.

"Come with me," I murmur.

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33

LYRA

CARMINE LEADS me through the bedroom, guiding me toward the full-length mirror against the far wall.

My brow furrows in confusion as he makes me face it, standing behind me.

Then I see our reflection.

And I realize where this is going.

I stiffen slightly, my pulse jumping, the old fears stirring awake and creeping in.

“Carmine, what—” My voice catches as his hands move, fingers skimming over my shoulders, tracing my spine, making a shiver cascade down my back.

His gaze in the mirror is intense, unyielding. “Watch.”

I try to twist away, but his hands tighten on my hips, keeping me in place.

The silk of my camisole whispers against my skin as he slides his fingers beneath the hem. Slowly, deliberately, he pulls it up, inch by inch revealing my body to me.

I inhale sharply, watching his fingers drag over my stomach, his knuckles brush the underside of my ribs as he lifts the camisole higher, past my breasts.

I let out a barely-there whimper when the fabric catches for a moment at my collarbone, but he tugs again, freeing me completely.

The silk slips over my head and off my body, leaving me bare from the waist up, my skin flushed.

I try to cover myself. It's not embarrassment or shame, not with him. But we're facing a mirror. I'm being forced to watch this, to *see it*, and that has my pulse thudding.

But before I can, Carmine slides his hands down my arms to my hands, lacing his fingers through mine and pressing my palms to the mirror in front of me.

"*Carmine*…"

"Watch," he murmurs.

His hands glide back down, over my shoulders, my ribs, his touch exploring, memorizing. His hands trail lower, skimming the waistband of my silk shorts, fingers dipping inside, teasing the fabric.

I try to press my thighs together, but he nudges them apart with his knee, shaking his head.

His fingers hook into the waistband, and slowly, unhurriedly, he slides the shorts down, letting the silk glide over my hips, my thighs, my legs. They whisper to the floor, leaving me in nothing but the last thin scrap of lace between us.

I suck in a breath, watching myself in the mirror, watching the way his hands roam my newly bared skin, possessive and unyielding. His muscled arms wrap around me, and I shiver when I see one hand grip my breast and the other slide down to cup my pussy through my panties.

Anxiety roars loud in my ears. Panic begins to claw at the edges of my sanity.

I can't watch this.

Carmine just holds me close, his lips ghosting over my shoulder, my neck, my ear.

“No running,” he murmurs quietly. “No hiding. Look at yourself, Lyra.”

I shiver, trapped between his body and my own reflection, struggling to see myself the way he does. I swallow hard, staring at myself, at him standing behind me, fully dressed, while I’m so vulnerable.

His lips graze the shell of my ear, his breath warm, steady. “*Keep your fucking eyes open*,” he growls. “You need to see how beautiful you are, and not be afraid to *look at* that beauty.”

I shake slightly, my fingers twitching against the mirror’s surface.

I don’t know if I can do this.

He doesn’t give me a choice.

His hand twists, fingers sliding into the waist of my panties before he grabs them in a fist and drags them down my thighs. He leaves them bunched at my knees, then his hand slips up between my legs again and cups my bare pussy.

“Wait, let me turn around—”

“*No*.”

With a choked gasp, I cry out as he drags two fingers up my lips and rolls them over my clit. The electric pleasure and heat that instantly bloom in my core have my pulse skipping.

But still, I’m looking at it while it happens. Staring it in the face like a fucking nightmare.

I flinch, my eyes squeezing shut as the memories of that horrible day filter back in. The chains. The cages. The rack of dresses. The sound of flesh slapping flesh—

“*Open your eyes*, little dancer,” Carmine rasps into my ear. His hand slides up my body, pinching and rolling a nipple so hard I cry out before that same hand slips up to cup my jaw. “You will not be held captive by the past anymore,” he growls.

Slowly, his fingers start to rub my clit. I whimper, my teeth clamping down on my lower lip as my knees shake. I start to close my eyes again. Instantly, his long, powerful fingers are wrapping tight around my throat, sending a dark, vicious bolt throbbing through my core and making my eyes snap open.

"*Don't you dare close your eyes*," Carmine murmurs.

He suddenly pushes two fingers into me. A moan tumbles from my lips as my gaze drops between my legs, my mouth hanging open as I watch his thick fingers sink into me, stretching me open, stroking in and out. I watch my stomach muscles tighten and my nipples tighten to two aching pink peaks as Carmine fingers me and forces me to watch it all unfold.

There's no escape from his presence, his control, his heat.

Or from myself.

He presses against me, his hands moving deliberately, forcing me to feel every touch, to watch exactly what he's doing to me.

"*Look at yourself like this, little dancer.*"

I shudder, nails dragging against the glass. But then I truly see myself. I see us.

And it doesn't look like fear.

Carmine's hand roams from my throat to my breast, cupping it possessively and pinching the nipple between his thumb and finger. He rolls the throbbing point, bringing another ragged moan to my lips as his thick fingers thrust into me.

He leans closer, his teeth scraping my throat. "Such a good girl. You're doing so well. Keep your palms on the mirror. Don't look away."

He works me up slowly, teasingly, his fingers dragging me toward something inevitable that I can't fight. The pleasure builds, his fingers curling inside me and stroking me toward my explosion. I whimper, my eyes flickering.

“Eyes open.” His teeth press into my neck, branding me. “I want you to watch yourself come.”

I cry out, my body shaking, my head tilted back against his shoulder. His fingers ram into me, harder, faster, scissoring deep as his palm grinds against my throbbing clit. His fingers roll my nipples, pinching them as his teeth sink into my neck.

My eyes snap to my own in the mirror. And suddenly, I don’t see shame or fear, or anxiety, or anything to be run from.

I see *me*, breaking apart at the seams.

…And I shatter without warning.

The orgasm crashes over me like a shockwave, my hands pressed desperately to the mirror, my breath ragged and gasping.

Carmine doesn’t stop. Doesn’t let me go.

He holds me there, keeping me anchored, keeping me in the moment, forcing me to watch myself come. Forcing me to watch my flushed skin, wild eyes. A body that doesn’t look afraid anymore.

I barely have time to process it all before suddenly he’s inside me, stretching and filling me.

I gasp as his thick, swollen cock pushes into me from behind, my fingers clenched into fists against the mirror.

Carmine groans, his lips brushing my ear. “That’s it, baby. Watch how perfectly you take me.”

Suddenly, I can’t look away.

I don’t want to.

He starts tortuously slow, dragging it out, making me feel every inch of him.

Then, he snaps his hips forward and drives into me harder, deeper, rougher.

I cry out, my forehead pressing to the mirror, my breath fogging the surface as we move together.

Our rhythm becomes frantic, manic, all hungry need. Carmine's hands roam: claiming, possessing, gripping my hips tight enough to leave bruises, his lips dragging over my throat, my shoulder, my spine.

He watches me and my reflection, watches every flicker of pleasure and surrender as I give him everything.

I shatter again, my body clenching around him, a scream tearing from my throat. Carmine's grip is unrelenting, his groan low and raw, his head thrown back as he gives in completely.

The orgasm explodes through me, shaking me to my very core as my walls clamp down around his cock. My knees tremble, straining against the panties still wrapped around them, my gaze locked on our bodies in the mirror as Carmine slams into me.

I feel his muscles tighten, his grip on me squeezing mercilessly as his cock swells. I moan when I feel his hot cum spill into me as he drives me forward, pinning me to the glass with my hair in his fist and his cock buried deep inside me.

"*I'll light the fucking world on fire for you, little dancer,*" he groans into my ear as we grind together.

He was right.

It *is* beautiful. *We're* beautiful.

It's a fucked-up, dark, broken and twisted beauty.

…But it's beauty nonetheless.

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LYRA

NAOMI CAN'T STOP FIDGETING.

She stands in front of the mirror, smoothing wrinkles that aren't there from her costume, adjusting the beading on the bodice, her fingers moving too quickly.

Milena watches her, arms crossed, smirking. “You keep that up, you’re going to tear the damn thing.”

Naomi exhales sharply. “It just… It has to be perfect.”

The dressing room is buzzing around us with frantic pre-performance energy.

It’s not opening night. We’re a long ways from that. But it's still a performance—the first preview of *Swan Lake*, for a small invited audience comprised of VIPs, Zakharova backers, and other “friends of the company”.

“You *are* perfect,” I tell her, stepping beside her. “You’re ready.”

Naomi shakes her head, her hands twitching at her sides. “I don't know. This is big.” Her voice lowers. “These are people who decide whether or not we have a future in this company.”

Milena rolls her eyes. “Okay, first of all, no they don’t. Secondly, you were cast in the role for a reason. You’re going to kill it.”

Naomi is *always* convinced she's a fraud, that she'll screw up. I've never met her father, but from what I gather, Congressman Kim is probably a *huge* part of that inferiority complex, even though Naomi is incredible.

"Yeah, well…" She looks down, fidgeting with her hands. "It might be my role *for now*…"

It's worth mentioning that Naomi's self-confidence has only taken another hit since Madame Kuzmina announced Dove as her understudy. Dove who is, no joke, *really* fucking good.

No better than Naomi, but try telling her that.

"Guys, I don't…" Her face twists in the mirror. "This is a lot. I mean, the backers—"

"You're very talented."

The three of us turn to see Dove standing behind us. She's dressed and ready to go, as she'll be dancing in the *corps de ballet* tonight, and her usual goth- Barbie aesthetic somehow looks even more intimidating in full stage makeup. Her pinkish-silver hair is skinned back in a tight bun, and her posture is calm, collected—like nerves are beneath her.

Naomi blinks, clearly taken aback. "I—thank you," she says.

Dove just shrugs, smoothing a hand over her tutu. "Have fun out there."

Naomi smiles. "Thanks."

After Dove walks away. Milena slowly turns to us, her blonde brow arched.

"*Soooo*, we like her now, yes?" She looks imploringly at Naomi. "*Can* we like her? Please? She's so fucking cool."

Naomi blushes, rolling her eyes. "Why are you asking me? I think she's great."

Before I can say anything, someone clears their throat behind me.

"Ms. Barone?"

Bianca lifts her head from where she’s doing some last-minute stretching on the floor behind us. I follow her confused gaze to a young woman standing in the doorway, holding a *huge* bouquet of black roses.

“Yes?” she says, a puzzled look on her face. “But it’s actually Mrs. Drakos now.”

The woman with the flowers frowns. “Oh, sorry. This is for Barone?”

“Hey—dumb-dumb.”

I turn to scowl at Milena, who's elbowing me in the ribs. “What?”

“That’s *you*, bitch.”

Fuck me. It *is*.

“Uh, here!” I blurt, stepping forward.

The woman smiles and hands me the huge bouquet. “For you, then.”

Naomi lets out a low whistle. “That’s—dramatic.”

Milena smirks. “I wonder who those are from.”

I feel my face heat. I *really* wanted Carmine to be here tonight. But the performance tonight is only for high-level investors in the company. More to the point, this morning, he had to jet off to Chicago on business at the last minute.

But it’s fine. Again, it’s only a preview.

“Thank you,” I smile to the woman.

She glances around the room. “So, we’ll just bring in the rest, yeah?”

My brow furrows. “The rest?”

“Just a minute.”

She turns on her heel and walks out of the dressing room before I can ask what the hell she means. Then the door opens again, and she comes back in with another huge bouquet of black roses.

Two other women follow her, also holding bouquets.

Two more follow *them*.

What. The. Fuck.

By the time the five of them have made about four trips in each, the dressing room is drowning in gorgeous black roses.

And *everyone* is staring at me.

“Yes, I’ve heard it’s the *subtle*, small gestures that really keep a marriage together,” Milena deadpans.

Bianca walks over, a smirk on her face as she eyes bouquet number forty-three in my arms. “I *did* warn you he could get obsessive.”

* * *

THE PERFORMANCE IS FLAWLESS.

Naomi's Odette is innocent and lyrical, her Odile sharp and dramatic, every line of her body perfect. The thirty-two fouettés that she was so worried about go off without a hitch. Me, I let myself fall into the music, moving in perfect sync with the rest of the swans.

Midway through the last act, something shifts.

I feel it before I see it. A sensation that I’m being watched—which, yes, is stupid, given that I'm literally on stage in front of an audience.

But it’s not the feeling of being normal-watched.

It’s darker than that. Fiercer.

More intense.

I don’t dare break focus, but my heart beats faster, my pulse thrumming in my ears.

The next time I'm facing the audience, my gaze flicks into the house, and I see him.

Carmine.

Front row center, seated with the VIPs.

He came.

A wild tug ripples through me, and for the rest of the performance, my every movement is now heightened, electric.

After the final bows the curtain drops and I turn, walking quickly off stage into the darkened wings.

I startle when a tall figure steps out of the shadows in front of me, but my jangling pulse slows when I realize who it is.

Kir watches me with his usual smirk, clapping his hands slowly. “Magnificent performance,” he murmurs. “Truly.”

I smile a little stiffly at the powerful Bratva kingpin who also happens to own the very building we’re standing in.

Kir’s gaze flicks past me, nodding in the direction of the audience.

“I believe I saw your husband out there.”

The way he says it makes my stomach tighten.

“You know,” he continues casually, “this show *was* exclusively for VIPs and high- level backers of the company. That means an annual contribution of five million.”

He waits a beat, letting the words sink in.

“Oh…” My brow worries. “I'm sorry. I…I guess he just really wanted to see me—”

“Carmine cut a check at the door.”

My eyes go wide.

Kir smiles. “So—yes, Lyra, I think he really wanted to see you dance tonight.”

I stand there in shock, my skin tingling as I try and wrap my head around what he just told me. Kir clears his throat, smiling as he runs a hand over his chiseled jaw.

“You can tell your husband that the board thanks him, and that his name will be added to the gold-level patron plaque on the wall in the lobby by next week at the latest.” He dips his chin. “Again, lovely performance, Lyra. I particularly enjoyed your work in the *pas de trois*.”

Before I can find my words, Kir turns and disappears into the shadows.

Well…*wow*.

I turn to head back to the dressing room, when suddenly, something hard, muscled, and savage crashes into me. Powerful arms wrap around me like iron. The familiar, overwhelmingly masculine scent of leather, tangerine and rosewood swirls around me.

A grin lifts the corners of my mouth as I twist in Carmine’s arms to look up into his piercing blue eyes.

“*Hi*,” I blurt through a big grin. I laugh as he scoops me into his arms, dragging me into the shadows. His mouth crashes against mine, desperate and unyielding.

“What the fuck did Kir want?” he growls against my lips.

I ignore his jealous possessiveness and the raw fury vibrating off him. Instead, I whisper, “Did you seriously spend five million dollars to get into the show?”

His scowl deepens. “That Russian fucker has a big mouth—”

“*Thank you*,” I whisper, pressing my lips to his again. “For showing up.”

He shakes off his irritation, his grip tightening to lift me slightly off the ground as he kisses me harder, deeper, like he needs me to feel just how much he wanted to be here. His breath is hot against my mouth, his voice gruff and absolute.

“I’ll always show up.”

A grin lifts the corners of my lips. “Just like you’ll light the world on fire for me?”

“Exactly like that.”

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LYRA

I WINCE as I towel dry my hair, my muscles protesting every movement.

We played rough last night after the show.

Like, *really* rough.

Heat rises to my cheeks as the memories flit through my mind—him chasing me through the house, his footsteps heavy and determined, my breathless laughter cut short when he pinned me down and fucked me within an inch of my life.

I tug on a pair of leggings and pull a sweater over my head, the soft fabric brushing over my still-sensitive skin and the bruises Carmine left behind.

I exhale sharply, shaking off the shiver that threatens to creep down my spine, forcing my hands to stay steady as I smooth the hem.

I don’t want to think about the text yet.

Don’t want to think about what I have to do.

Vera was fine yesterday when I called her. Still bitter. Still cruel. But fine.

She accused me of forgetting about her, said how *I’m living it up in my new life while she’s still rotting away in that shitty apartment.* Or words to that effect.

I almost reminded her that it was her choice to stay there, that she could have made something of herself a hundred different times over the years,

but I didn’t.

At the end of the day, she’s still my mother.

I sigh, shoving the thought deep down so I don’t have to look at it. Don’t have to acknowledge what I might have to do.

Right now, I just need to breathe.

The scent hits me the second I step out of the bedroom.

Roses—dark, heavy, decadent.

When we got home last night, the house was buried in them, even more than the dressing room.

Black roses. *Everywhere*.

Another over-the-top gesture from my husband.

Maybe it’s more a reminder of his claim on me. But even if that’s the case, I’m not complaining.

Carmine is standing by the island when I step into the kitchen, his broad back to me, sleeves rolled up and shirt half-unbuttoned, like he didn’t bother finishing the job.

I clear my throat, still groggy from sleep. “Morning.”

He turns slowly, his gaze dragging over me like he’s already undressing me.

My stomach flutters. I'm awake now.

His lips curve dangerously.

“Come here.”

It’s not a request.

I move toward him. The second I’m close enough, his hands are on me. He grabs my wrists, spinning me and pinning me against the counter, caging me in. I gasp, my back arching as his body presses flush against me, hot, solid, unrelenting.

“Carmine—”

His mouth crashes to mine, swallowing my words.

His hands grip my hips, dragging me tighter against him.

His teeth scrape my bottom lip, then my jaw, my throat.

I whimper when he bites down firmly, and I feel his lips curl to a smirk on my skin.

“You’re sore,” he murmurs, his hands skimming lower.

Heat pools low in my core. “Maybe.”

He chuckles darkly. “Only *maybe*?”

His fingers tighten, forcing a gasp from my lips.

“Next time, I’ll have to make sure.”

The words send a shiver down my spine and make a thrill curl deep in my stomach. My lips part, my breath coming unevenly. Then something pops out that has nothing to do with what’s currently going on.

“What *is* the Black Court?”

Carmine's grip stays firm on me, but his expression shifts, just slightly, before smoothing back into an unreadable mask.

He doesn’t answer. Instead, his fingers resume their slow, lazy movements, like he’s giving himself time to think.

I swallow, forcing my voice to remain steady. “Carmine.” I say his name softly as I reach up, fingers brushing gently over his jaw. “I’m not passing any judgment. I just… I want to know. It seems like such a big part of your world.”

His frown deepens, his thumb pausing mid-stroke against my hip.

“I *notice* when you leave late at night,” I continue. “I’ve never questioned it, but…”

“Now you are,” he growls.

I nod.

For a moment his blue eyes search mine, as if weighing what to say and what to keep buried. Then, finally, he exhales.

“It started at Knightsblood.” His voice is quiet. “I assume you've heard of it?”

Of course I have. It's the notorious ‘Mafia Hogwarts’, where the next generation of crime bosses, arms dealers, and underworld elites sharpen their claws before inheriting their family empires.

He smirks when he sees the recognition on my face. “I was in Para Bellum.”

That name rings a bell, too. One of the four exclusive student clubs on campus.

“There were five of us,” Carmine continues. “We had…similar views. On power. On control.” His gaze sharpens. “On what the criminal underworld *should* be.”

I don’t say anything, letting him continue.

“There’s an old saying,” he murmurs, “that there's no honor among thieves.” He watches me carefully. “But there has to be. There *must* be some level of order, some code of conduct, or it all devolves into chaos.”

I swallow nervously, my fingers tightening on his forearm. “And… The Black Court enforces that code of conduct?”

His lips curve slightly. “Something like that.”

I hesitate. “Is it sanctioned by the major crime families?”

Carmine laughs mirthlessly under his breath. “What do *you* think?”

I exhale. Right, of course not.

“So—what, you just decide who deserves to be punished?” I murmur. “And how?”

Carmine leans in, his nose brushing mine. “Someone has to.”

The words settle heavily in my chest.

Someone has to.

“Who else is in it?”

“Lyra.”

His face darkens, but not with anger. Just a warning that this is as far as he goes in terms of telling me about this.

“Who we are in Court, wearing our masks, is completely different to who we are in real life.” His fingers skim my jaw, my throat, my collarbone. “Names don’t matter there.”

I frown slightly, not understanding. “So, you don't even know who they are?”

Carmine chuckles a quiet laugh, pressing a slow kiss to my jaw. “Of course I do.” His lips graze my skin, sending a fresh shiver down my spine. “But what happens in that room, under those masks… That’s something else.”

My stomach twists.

“Enough,” he growls quietly, pinning me harder against the counter behind me. “I have to go deal with some work bullshit.”

I nod, blushing and wincing a little as he leans in to kiss my neck, then bites it.

After he leaves, I stay in the kitchen, having coffee and some breakfast.

Guilt gnaws at me. Yes, I asked him about the Court because I was curious. But that wasn’t the only reason. It was the threatening text from the other night, too.

Whoever the fuck that is, they want something. And it’s pretty clear what happens to my mother if I don’t come through.

My phone dings suddenly, startling me. I glance at it, and my blood runs cold.

UNKNOWN

You're testing my patience. You now have 24 hours to deliver what I asked for.

I swallow hard, my pulse hammering in my ears and my fingers trembling as I type out a reply.

ME

I don’t know how to get it. I swear.

The response comes immediately.

UNKNOWN

Try harder. Or in 24 hours, you'll have blood on your hands.

My breath catches. A second later, another text—a photo of my mother, now with today's newspaper, sleeping soundly, her hair spread over her pillow, completely unaware.

Then another picture. My blood turns to ice.

It's Bianca—walking out of the theater, her head down, earphones in. Oblivious.

The final text slams into me like a physical blow.

UNKNOWN

24 hours, or they die. Warn them, or tell anyone, and they die.

The phone slips from my hand, clattering against the counter. My hands press against the cool stainless steel of the sink as I suck in a shaky breath.

I can’t tell Carmine. Not when his sister is in danger now, too.

I feel panic building, pressing beneath my ribs, threatening to suffocate me. But I don’t have time for fear. I need answers—something, anything—fast.

I push the horrible feelings of guilt and betrayal aside as I make my way upstairs and start to paw through Carmie's closet and dresser drawers. His home office is next, then the library, then the rest of the house, looking for *anything*.

Finally, the only thing I've got left to search is his laptop, back in his home office. It's password protected, so I sit down and start trying to the obvious ones: his name, Nico's, Bianca's, Dante's. I try Vito, and his late mother, Giada. I even try *my* name, which is pathetic, and…well, fuck. It's not the password anyway.

I slump onto my elbows with a scowl on my face, glaring at the laptop, then spin slowly in the chair, trying to come up with *anything* as I drink in the room.

Suddenly, I come to a stop, my brows furrowing when they land on the old, framed poster for Lickety Splits; a "gentleman's club", according to the poster, that "showcases the hottest girls in New York!!!".

I roll my eyes, but then I grin. Bianca's told me about Vito's old strip club, and—let's be real—that is *by far* the single greatest name for a strip club, ever.

Maybe?

I turn back to the laptop and type "licketysplits" into the password field.

Fuck off.

I'm in.

I shouldn't be doing this. I know that. And yet, my fingers are already moving, clicking through files, scrolling through folders.

I don't even know what I'm looking *for*…just anything that connects Carmine to the Black Court.

My mind flickers with the pictures of Vera.

Of Bianca.

A cold sensation drags its claws up my spine as I keep hunting. My pulse thumps steadily against my ribs, and I try not to focus on the gnawing guilt sitting heavy as an elephant on my chest.

I skim through a folder marked "Confidential Projects", hoping that's supremely cheesy code for the obvious. But it's not: just a bunch of

financial records, spreadsheets, and tax information on a commercial property it looks like the Barone family is purchasing.

Fuck.

My fingers drum against the desk, frustration curling tight in my chest before I start clicking away again.

Then, my breath catches: a folder within a folder labeled "Court Meetings."

I click on it, my fingers trembling as I open the most recent document. It’s a set of meeting notes, precise, clinical.

I scan the first few bulleted lines, my pulse hammering.

- *What did Arkadi have on the Court?*
- *Who is or was his buyer?*

My lungs tighten as I keep reading, my stomach sinking lower with every line. There are other things that suggest Arkadi may have worked for the Court. Or had been part of one of their trials. Had he attended one?

The ugly implications twist inside me as I keep reading.

And then everything shatters away, turning to dust, leaving me with parched, cracked lips and the sensation that a hole has just been punched straight through my chest.

- *Get close with Arkadi’s daughter. Find out if she can be an asset.*
- *Can she help us get whatever Arkadi had?*

Everything inside me goes numb. The warmth I felt earlier this morning turns to icy poison in my veins as my heart tints black.

I read the words again.

And again.

And again.

The lines punch through me, jagged, cruel. My throat tightens. My hands shake.

Then I smell it: tangerine and rosewood, masculine. My whole body stiffens and jerks upright, a cold sensation slicing into my gut.

“What *the fuck* are you doing?”

I whirl, my heart slamming into my ribs.

Carmine is standing in the doorway, his eyes nothing but fire and wrath.

For a second, he doesn’t say anything. He just stares pure malice at me. The air crackles, the tension so thick I think I might choke on it.

Suddenly, he storms toward me. I shove back from the desk, scrambling out of the chair, but he’s faster.

Carmine grabs me and spins me into the bookshelves, slamming my body so hard the shelves rattle and a few books topple to the floor. I barely have time to take a breath before he’s on me, boxing me in, his chest pressed to mine, his hands braced on either side of my head.

“I asked you a *fucking* question,” he snarls.

His voice feels like the edge of a blade, pressed to my throat.

I gasp, sucking in a breath. But then anger rises—burning through the fear and betrayal, through everything.

I lift my chin, matching his fire with my own.

“You used me,” I spit venomously. “*Didn’t you*.”

Carmine’s eyes flicker, darkness flashing across his face before rage slams back into place.

“*What?*”

“YOU. USED. ME!” I scream, my pulse roaring like napalm in my veins. “The whole reason you got close to me?! You *married* me?! It was all because—?”

“I seem to remember *you* barging your way into that audition!” he snarls.

“But then *you* came to *me*!” I shriek, my voice almost breaking. “And now I find out it was all because of him?! Because of my fucking *father*?!”

His eyes are black fire. “That’s bullshit.”

“Funny,” I laugh, but it comes out broken. “Because I just read your little fucking meeting notes on your laptop. The ones where your precious Black Court was trying to *get close* to Arkadi’s daughter. Trying to see if I could be an *asset*.”

“Lyra…” His voice is low, tight, like he’s trying to hold back a hurricane.

I shove at his chest, my blood roaring in my ears. “Tell me it’s not true! Fucking *tell me*!”

His jaw clenches so tight I swear it's going to break.

“It’s not like that.”

My stomach twists. I want to believe him. But how the fuck can I?

“Then tell me what it *is* like.” My voice shakes, but I hold his gaze, unflinching. “Tell me what the fuck I was to you in the beginning.”

His nostrils flare. His hands flex against the wood on either side of my head.

But he doesn’t respond.

And that’s my answer.

I shove him again, my voice breaking. “Fuck you.”

“I see how it is,” Carmine purrs dangerously. His lips curl into a snarl, his body pressing harder against mine. “I’m the villain suddenly. I’m the monster.” His hand snaps out, gripping my jaw, jerking my face up to his. “But what the fuck about *you*, Lyra? What were you snooping for just now?”

My stomach lurches and I try to twist away, but he tightens his hold.

“What the fuck were you doing?” he demands. “Spying on me?”

I glare up at him, my heart slamming so hard it might burst.

“I was just trying to understand who the hell I married.”

His laugh is sharp and mocking. “Bullshit.”

I try to escape again, but he doesn’t budge.

“Tell me, *wife*.” His voice turns dark, dangerous, hypnotic. “Who the *fuck* are you working for?”

My pulse arrests.

“*What*?”

“*Tell me*!” he roars. “Tell me who the fuck you’re collecting information for!”

I don’t answer.

His fingers tighten around my waist, yanking me against him. I gasp, my body arching involuntarily, my hands gripping his arms as his dominance rolls over me like a goddamn electrical storm.

Suddenly, he’s spinning me around and the breath is knocked out of me as he slams me against the bookshelves.

He grabs a hank of my hair in his fist. His knee jams between my thighs, shoving them apart, as if he’s about to fuck the truth out of me.

The whole room goes dim and faraway.

I want this.

I don’t.

I want *him*.

I don’t.

I crave him.

I’m fucking *terrified* of him.

The air crackles, my skin throbbing and prickling as he grabs the back of my leggings and prepares to shove them down. I can’t think. Can’t speak.

Can’t breathe.

And suddenly, as everything comes to a frenzied crescendo…

I stop fighting.

I don’t thrash. I don’t scream. I don’t move at all. I just go completely still and limp against the bookshelves.

Carmine’s breath rasps against my ear, his body wound tight, ready for me to resist.

But I don’t.

I just... give up.

Give in.

Stop fighting.

His chest heaves against my back. His grip tightens for half a second, waiting.

But I just stay still, and silent.

Suddenly, his hands loosen and then drop away. The very air in the room stops moving. The tension doesn’t snap. It dissolves into something cold. Something wrecked and ruined.

His face is stricken, unreadable, as I turn to face him. Just a hard look in his eyes and a grimness in his jaw.

A little while ago, I wondered about the two of us coming up with a safe word—something to let reality back in if we were ever playing too rough and things got too much for me. But then, I realized this man I’ve married was so deep inside of me—so entwined and ensnared with what makes me *me*, that we wouldn’t even need a word. He can already read my thoughts and every nuance of me, after all.

Maybe that was naïve. But I never brought it up, which means there is no safe word between us.

Except, now I realize there is. It’s just not a word at all.

It’s silence.

It’s the absence of fight or flight.

It’s me letting the ball drop to the ground, because I’m not playing the game anymore.

And so, silently, the air crackling around us, Carmine and I just stare at each other.

I don’t say anything.

He doesn’t either.

Neither of us blinks.

Neither of us breathes.

He steps away from me, and my heart begins to wrench. I blink, my haggard eyes meeting his fierce ones in the silent room.

A flicker of something raw and broken flashes across his face. Something that won’t ever be mended. Not now.

Neither of us says a word, but we both feel the weight of what just happened.

It's the only way this ends.

The only way this was ever *going* to end.

Slowly, I back away from him, my eyes never leaving his. I keep going, bumping a side table before I get to the door. I reach behind me, twisting the knob and pulling it open before I slip out.

Just before I close it, our eyes lock again through the crack.

Then, with a click, our connection breaks.

I turn, and I run.

This time, he doesn’t chase me.

And that’s the unkindest cut of all.

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36

LYRA

THE COLD AIR hits my face like a slap as I stumble out of the mansion, my breath choppy, my heart pounding so hard it drowns out everything else.

Then the reality outside the house slams into me.

Voices. Shouts. The blinding flashes of cameras.

The Barone mansion is *swarmed* with professional news crews, amateur journalists, and maybe just people who stopped to grab a torch or pitchfork, spilling off the sidewalk and onto part of 5th Avenue.

The moment they spot me, chaos erupts.

"*LYRA*!!" a voice screams as a million camera flashes explode in my face.

"*Do you have any comment about your father's copycat killer*?"

"*Did you know the victims*?"

"*Do you think your father is still alive*?"

"*Where's Marcus Chen?!?*"

The last question is shrieked above the rest, sending a shockwave of panic down my spine.

I stagger back, the world spinning as the flashes disorient me, the reporters' voices blending into one horrific, unrelenting assault.

I don’t think. I just break into a sprint across 5th Avenue, headlights blinding me, horns screaming.

A car swerves, missing me by inches, and the driver leans out the window, shouting something I don’t hear.

Footsteps thunder behind me—not just reporters, but cameramen, conspiracy nuts, people screaming my father’s name. I push harder, lungs burning, the frigid air slashing my skin. I dive into Central Park, the trees swallowing me up.

I don’t stop.

I don’t slow.

Tears blur my vision, making me stumble on the uneven ground, catching myself just before I fall.

The voices behind me fade, but I still don’t feel safe.

My phone dings, slicing into my psyche. I gasp, jolting as I skid to a stop near the Glade Arch. My fingers tremble and shake as I pull my phone from my pocket and stare in horror at the screen, my breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

UNKNOWN

I just saw you on the news, Lyra.

UNKNOWN

You look sad.

UNKNOWN

I hope this doesn’t mean you didn’t get me what I want.

My chest tightens. I force my shaking fingers to type.

ME

I have more time

ME

It hasn’t been 24 hrs yet

UNKNOWN

Does this mean you don’t have what I asked for?

I hesitate. My hands shake harder. I don’t know how to answer.

My phone buzzes harshly again, as if to say “*time's up*”.

UNKNOWN

Now the game changes, Lyra.

My stomach drops as I read the next message.

UNKNOWN

Now I have to hurt the people you care about.

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37

LYRA

MY HANDS WON'T STOP SHAKING as the cab peels away from the curb outside Central Park.

I grip my phone so tightly my knuckles ache from the force of it. I try to breathe, but my throat feels constricted, like there's a hand pressing down on my windpipe.

I stab my password into the screen, then scroll to my mother's contact and bash it with my thumb.

It goes straight to voicemail.

My heart lurches into my throat as the city blurs past the window, neon lights bleeding together, buildings morphing into jagged streaks of gray and gold.

I smash Vera's number again.

Voicemail.

My fingers are trembling too hard to hold the phone properly as I start drafting a message to Carmine. My vision swims.

My mother and Bianca are in danger. And *I put them there*.

ME

THREAT AGAINST BIANCA AND MY MOM. GET BIANCA SAFE ASAP!!!

I barely have time to inhale before the screen starts flashing.

Carmine’s calling.

My chest splinters open, the air punched from my lungs.

I can’t talk to him, not now. Not when I can still feel the weight of his hands on me from earlier and hear his voice in my head, filled with fury and betrayal.

Not when I know the truth—that I was a pawn. A means to an end.

A new kind of sickness curls deep inside me, hollowing me out from the inside.

The phone keeps buzzing in my hand, Carmine’s name blazing across the screen, but I can’t press accept.

I know what will happen if I hear his voice. I’ll shatter into something irreparable. So I just sit there, staring at his name as the phone rings and rings.

ME

Please just get Bianca safe. I can’t explain now. She and my mom are in danger.

My phone dies right after I hit send.

Motherfucker.

Just then, the cab pulls up to the curb outside my old building. I don’t wait for the fare to come up on the payment terminal, I just throw cash at the driver and run.

I bolt up the stairs two at a time, pelting down the hallway until I get to our door.

It’s ajar.

I crash into the apartment, my mind already jumping to the worst conclusions.

“*Mom*?!” I scream, my voice broken and trembling.

There’s just silence in reply.

“MOM!!”

I stumble further inside, scanning the space quickly. Nothing looks out of place. No overturned furniture, or other sign of a struggle.

I move toward the bedroom, my pulse hammering as I push the door open—

Click.

Every muscle in my body stiffens at the unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked behind me.

“Turn around.”

No.

It’s the voice that hits me even harder than the sound of the gun cocking, even as I start to turn around.

Vera stands behind me, a gun leveled directly at my chest.

For a second, my brain is unable to process what I’m looking at. What this whole scenario *is*. It makes no sense. Like a glitch in the matrix.

She tilts her head, her grip on the gun steady.

“Sit down, Lyra.” Her voice is calm, almost bored. “We've got a lot to talk about.”

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CARMINE

THE PHONE RINGS. And rings. And fucking *rings*.

No answer from Lyra.

I stare at her name on the screen. My fingers tighten around the phone, my pulse a slow, steady throb.

Something is off. Something is *really* off.

I read the second text from her again.

LYRA

Please just get Bianca safe. I can't explain now. She and my mom are in danger.

I sit there for one more second, then I'm pacing the room, dialing another number.

Bianca not answering has my pulse spiking. Then I try Kratos.

He picks up on the fourth ring, sounding annoyed. "Carmy, I'm a little tied up—"

"Where the fuck is my sister?!" I snarl.

"Carmine—"

"*Bianca*!" I roar. "Where the *fuck* is she?!"

"Take it easy man, she's right here," he growls.

“Is that my brother?” I hear my sister’s voice say lazily in the background. “Carmine, let me explain something to you about cycles and optimum fertility windows.”

My face scrunches up. “Jesus fucking Christ,” I snap. “I don’t—”

“When a man and a woman love each other *very* much,” my sister giggles in the background, “and they want to make a baby to express that love—”

“*Kratos*,” I snarl lethally.

He clears his throat. “I, uh…sorry, man,” he grunts. “I mean, that you had to hear—”

“*Is my sister fucking SAFE!*” I bellow into the phone.

“Always.” There’s no hesitation in his response. “I don’t let anything hurt what’s mine.”

That satisfies me. For now.

“Are you home?”

“Yes,” he grunts.

“Good. Stay there. Call backup that you trust. I’m sending over some of my own men. *Stay inside*,” I bark before hanging up.

Another quick call has Santino and ten of my guys heading to Kratos and Bianca’s penthouse.

Then I get in my car and drive like a man possessed to Lyra’s old apartment.

* * *

THE FRONT DOOR IS CLOSED, but not locked.

I push inside, gun drawn, my senses on high alert. The place is empty and eerily still, and there’s no signs of a struggle.

But there’s also no sight of Lyra or her mother, either.

I scan the space, scowling when my gaze lands on the coffee table with Lyra’s phone sitting on it. The fucking battery's dead.

I grab it and plug it in before I turn to scan the rest of the place. Just as I’m about to head down the little hallway to the bedrooms and bathroom, a metallic glint on the floor catches my eye.

It’s her silver necklace with the ballet shoe pendant, lying half underneath a side table.

I walk over, crouching down to pick it up, my pulse humming.

Lyra loves this necklace. She almost *never* takes it off. It’s actually one of the very few ground rules we’ve had in our games; that I never tear this from her, or break it in any way.

My chest tightens. This was left here on purpose.

A chime pulls my attention from the necklace. Lyra’s phone is back on.

It’s…strange that she left it here if she and Vera left. Even with a threat looming, it doesn’t make sense that she’d just leave it.

I punch in her passcode and tap on her messaging app.

That’s when I see them, and my jaw grinds.

Text after text from an unknown number.

Demands. Orders. *Threats*.

UNKNOWN

I just saw you on the news, Lyra.

UNKNOWN

You look sad.

UNKNOWN

I hope this doesn’t mean you didn’t get me what I want.

Holy shit.

ME

I have more time

ME

it hasn't been 24 hrs yet

UNKNOWN

Does this mean you don't have what I asked for?

UNKNOWN

Now the game changes, Lyra.

UNKNOWN

Now I have to hurt the people you care about.

Fuck me.

She wasn't looking for information because she wanted to.

She was looking because someone was *making her*.

I scroll up, and my vision turns red when I see the picture of my sister sent from the unknown number, and the threat of not to tell anyone.

I grind my teeth as my eyes narrow to dangerous slits.

Lyra didn't tell me about everything that was happening, and why she was poking around my laptop, because she was scared of something happening to Bianca.

My phone dings loudly, shattering my attention. I see The Stag's name on the screen and hit accept.

"*What*," I grunt, starting to prowl through the rest of the apartment to see what I can find.

"What's going on?" The Stag growls in reply, hearing the tension in my voice.

"Lots. There's been a threat made against Lyra's mother and Bianca, and someone's been forcing Lyra to dig into me."

The Stag swears under his breath. "Okay, what do you need?"

"Not sure yet. I'm at Vera's place, but there's no sign of either of them. Lyra's phone is here… I think they went somewhere together."

“Fuck,” The Stag hisses. “I called because I have some more information about Arkadi’s death that might interest you. But it can wait. Go do what you need to—”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m listening.”

He clears his throat. “Arkadi’s will specified burial. But he was cremated.”

I frown. “Vera could’ve made that call as next of kin, which I assume she was.”

“Yeah, she could have.” The Stag’s voice sharpens. “But she didn’t. At least nowhere where I can find it recorded. Also, the medical examiner who signed off on Arkadi’s death?” The Stag continues, his voice relentless. “Killed himself a week after Arkadi died. Prescription pain meds overdose.”

I inhale deeply, forcing my tone to stay even despite the slow, sharp chill slithering down my spine.

“That’s…one hell of a coincidence.”

“It becomes even less of one when you find out he was under investigation for taking money from the Nikolayev Bratva,” he mutters. “And it gets better. Vera only visited Arkadi in prison *once*, years before his death, when he got into a fight with some Aryan Brotherhood assholes and needed a blood transfusion. They brought her in because she had the right blood type. O-negative."

I exhale slowly as I step into Lyra’s room and start scanning it for anything that might tell me where the hell she is.

My eyes land on a small vanity by the window and the photo tucked into the mirror's frame. I step closer, peering at it. A young woman smiles back at me, holding a baby with red hair.

The woman is wearing the same necklace I’m holding in my palm.

A memory comes swirling back from weeks ago. I had asked Lyra about her ballet slipper pendant—the one I bloodied when I got it back from Grigori Popov and his men—and she said it came from her Aunt Alison. I guess that's her.

“How’d they manage to convince Vera to give Arkadi blood?” Vera was famously outspoken against her husband after everything blew up.

I walk out of Lyra’s room and into Vera’s. Instantly, the scent of stale cigarette smoke and cheap perfume slams into me. The place is a mess—dirty clothes piled in a corner, unmade bed, empty booze bottles littering the nightstand.

I frown as I stop and glance down at a big box of mail against the wall, mostly junk or sales offers, and rifle through some of it.

“They didn’t,” The Stag replies. “They *compelled* her. Arkadi was a possible witness in some other mafia case. So the State of New York needed him alive, and she was the key to that with their matching O-negative blood and it being an emergency . State prosecutors got a special judge’s order forcing Vera to donate blood to Arkadi. But I think you’re missing the point.”

I frown. “Which is?”

“Your wife has type AB blood.”

I stop moving, instantly. The world goes still, and a ringing sound begins to whine in my ears.

Holy. Fucking. *Fuck*.

Type O is recessive. Arkadi’s offspring could *only* have the same.

The whining in my ears crescendos to a roar as the realization slams into me.

“Arkadi wasn’t her father,” I say quietly.

The Stag’s voice darkens. “Given what you just told me about Lyra being under threat, and presumably with Vera, I’d be much more concerned right now that it means Vera categorically cannot be her mother.”

My breath stills.

Oh fuck.

“Do you have *any* idea where they might have gone?”

My gaze snaps back to the box of mail.

Something itches at the back of my mind, something I didn't fully process before.

I crouch, grabbing a handful of envelopes from the top, rifling through them with shaking fingers. There are some sent from a legal firm, a few medical bills, some opened ones that seem like they probably contained Vera's disability checks. Then suddenly, my eyes land on two offers from some shitty used car dealership promising zero percent down.

…A shitty used car dealership in *Kingston*, New York, two hours north of the city.

That's where Lyra grew up.

My eyes drop to the mailing address, and everything goes sideways.

They're addressed to Lyra's childhood house.

…And they're postmarked just three weeks ago.

I lurch to my feet.

That's where they are.

And I've already wasted too much fucking time.

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39

LYRA

I STOPPED FIGHTING A WHILE AGO.

Every bump and jolt in the van jars my bones. My wrists are raw, chafing against the ropes binding them behind my back. The gag cuts into the corners of my mouth, the damp fabric suffocating.

I have no idea how long we've been driving since Vera stuck a gun in my face and forced me downstairs into the van parked behind the apartment building.

She hasn't said a word since she shut the van door. It's that silence that's worse than anything.

The not understanding.

I flinch as the van suddenly jerks to a stop and the engine shuts off.

Terror curls through me as a car door opens and then slams shut. Boots scrape against the ground. Next is the click of the back door unlocking.

Light from a phone flashlight floods in, temporarily blinding me.

I squeeze my eyes shut against it, breathing through my nose, my chest rising and falling in frantic, shallow gasps.

Panic explodes through me as Vera grabs the ropes behind my back and yanks me out of the van. My bound wrists keep me from catching myself as I fall to the ground, my knees hitting dirt and gravel.

Pain screams up my legs, but it's nothing compared to what I feel when I finally lift my head and see where we are.

No.

The house looms in front of me, a blackened scar against the night. The porch sags a bit, and the windows are gaping holes, eyes that've been gouged out.

This is the place from my nightmares.

My throat constricts. My lungs seize up.

I can't breathe.

I start to hyperventilate, dragging ragged breaths through the gag in my mouth. But only thin wisps of air filter in, and black spots begin to swim at the edges of my vision.

My eyes bulge. My chest screams desperately for oxygen.

Finally, Vera marches over and yanks the gag out of my mouth. I choke and sputter, sucking in raw, gasping breaths of air.

"Mom!" I choke, still wheezing as I look up at her in horror. "What is this?!"

Vera doesn't respond. She just hauls me to my feet, shoving me forward. My legs barely hold me up, but it's clear I have no choice but to keep moving.

I glance around us. The forest seems to have grown closer to the house than I remember. The three neighboring houses on the street are all boarded up and look foreclosed on.

As if anyone would want to live here, in the shadow of *this* cursed house.

"Mom, please," I beg, my voice breaking. "Why are you—"

"Because I'm broke, Lyra," she finally says, her voice cold, matter of fact. Emotionless. "I'm in debt to some very, very bad people."

I trip over the steps as she forces me onto the porch.

“I need money. Lots of it.”

The door yawns open, and I’m shoved inside.

My nightmares come roaring back: the echoes of my screams from all those years ago. The terror closing in on me.

The chains.

The cages.

The rack of dresses and the nauseating sound of flesh on flesh.

Vera keeps pushing me down the hall, to the door that leads to the basement.

No. I can’t go down there.

I start thrashing and yanking in Vera’s grip.

“Mom!” I sob, my vision swimming. “Mom, *please*!” A sob wrenches from my throat as she heedlessly shoves me toward the door to the basement. “I can't go down there! MOM!”

Suddenly, she freezes. Her grip on my wrists tightens, and she sucks in an angry breath of air.

“Stop calling me that.”

I flinch as the venomous words spit from her lips. My pulse skips, my stomach knotting as I turn to stare at her. But she won’t even look at me.

I blink, my head shaking slowly. “Mom, what are you—”

“I said *stop calling me that*!” Vera whirls on me, gun in hand, her face twisting sharply.

My blood runs cold.

“Get down the stairs, Lyra. *Now*.”

Vera shoves me forward toward the basement door. My knees lock up, my heels scrabble against the floor, but she’s more determined than I am desperate.

She wants me down there.

The air feels like it’s getting thicker, suffocating, pressing down on me and wrapping around my throat. My vision swims, vicious memories slamming through me so rapidly I feel like I’m being pulled under.

I can hear the echoes of my own screams, still embedded in the walls of this house. I can smell the blood, the filth.

I can see my father’s hands around that girl’s throat.

“Mom, *please*,” I sob. “Please don’t make me go down there!”

Her fingers dig into my arms, forcing me closer.

“You’re my *mother*!” I choke, tears streaming down my face. “*Please*! Why are you doing this? If you need money—”

“I told you to stop calling me that,” she hisses, her tone razor-thin and cutting deep.

I shake my head, my vision blurred with tears. “I don’t understand,” I whisper. “Why are you saying that?!”

Vera’s jaw tightens, her lips pressing into a thin line. She looks like she’s about to break, like something is ripping her in two different directions. Like saying the words out loud has physically hurt her.

“Because *I’m not your fucking mother*,” she snaps.

Her voice rings through the basement, loud and harsh, slamming into me like a physical blow. I stagger, my chest hollowing out.

But I don’t have time to process it. Because suddenly, we’re at the sub-basement door.

The floor tilts.

“*Please*,” I whisper. “*Don’t*—”

Vera yanks open the door and shoves me in.

I stumble down the stairs in a nightmarish haze of agony, my vision blurring, my chest tightening like there are iron bands around my lungs.

The chains and cages are gone. But the metal hooks sunk into the walls are still there. So are the scrape marks on the floor, and the scratches on the wall where a rack of girls' dresses once dragged against it.

The door at the end that led to the other room is still there, too.

The one with the mattress. With the lights, and the camera.

With *him*.

I collapse into the folding metal chair Vera pushes me into, my body too weak and broken to resist anymore.

I hear the snap of duct tape, and then my arms are wrenched behind the chair back, still tied together, and my ankles are taped to the legs of it.

I don’t fight back. I can't.

I just sit there, numb, drowning in a horror I can’t escape.

A loud beeping sound suddenly pings through the room. Vera turns away from me, stalking toward a small laptop set up on a desk. The screen shows a security feed of the outside the house, and my heart surges when I follow her gaze and see the black Lamborghini tearing up the driveway come to a screeching stop next to the van.

Carmine.

“Vera,” I croak, my voice thin and shaky. “Whatever you need, let me help you. I can get you money, or anything else—”

She swings the gun toward me.

“Stop. Talking.”

Vera shakes her head, a cold, bitter smile twisting her lips.

“I was going to see what your husband would pay to get you back,” she murmurs thoughtfully. “But now I’ll see what his family will pay to get *him* back—the don of the whole organization should get a good price, huh?”

Then she turns to me, coldness on her face like a mask, and roughly tapes me tighter to the chair.

I struggle, but the duct tape leaves me with no way to escape. She shoves the gag back into my mouth, knotting it behind my head as the tears flow down my cheeks.

Suddenly, I hear footsteps descending the basement stairs.

I let out a muffled scream, thrashing against the chair. Vera gives me a warning look, shaking her head and holding a finger to her lips before she slips back into the shadows, behind an empty rack of shelves near the bottom of the steps.

The sub-basement door groans open.

A gun cocks.

Feet descend cautiously, a figure coming slowly into view across the room.

Black dress shoes. Black slacks. Veined, strong hands gripping a raised gun.

It’s him.

Carmine’s body is taut and dangerous, burning with raw fury as he descends the stairs. Then his gaze lands on me, gagged and duct taped to the chair.

His eyes lock on mine.

“Lyra—”

I try to warn him through the gag, but Vera lunges from the shadows, and my scream turns bloodcurdling when she slams the brick in her hand to the back of Carmine’s skull with a sickening crack.

Carmine’s body jerks, his gun clattering to the floor.

Then he crumples and drops, motionless.

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LYRA

CARMINE IS STILL UNCONSCIOUS.

His head is slumped forward, his chest rising and falling in slow, heavy breaths. Even though the gash on his temple has stopped bleeding, the sight of him motionless, bound to a chair, sends a fresh wave of anguish curling through me.

But he’s alive. For now.

Vera finishes binding him tight before stepping back. “Don’t waste your energy struggling, Lyra,” she mutters. “You’re not getting out of this.”

I ignore her, my eyes flicking back to Carmine, his breath slow but steady. My voice is shaking. “Let him go.”

Vera barely looks at me. She adjusts the gun in her grip, her lips pressing together in thin, tight contempt.

“This isn’t about him.” I see a crack in her expression and press my advantage. “This is between you and me, isn't it.”

She snaps, letting out a cold, hollow laugh. It’s thin, strained—dangerously close to unraveling. She starts pacing, the gun still clutched in her hand.

I inhale sharply. “What is this really about?”

Vera scoffs, shaking her head, her lips curling.

“You have no idea what it’s like to be trapped.”

I flinch at the pure, unadulterated venom in her voice.

She inhales raggedly, her shoulders rising with the effort.

“I spent years under his thumb,” she mutters. “Letting that man dictate everything in my life. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think—every move I made was about keeping him happy and satisfied, so I didn't get thrown in the fucking basement with the others.”

“So to save yourself, you helped him,” I say icily. “You *helped him* take those girls down here and rape them, and torture them, and *kill them*—”

“After I had that monster cremated,” she spits, her voice dropping lower, turning to steel coated in acid, “I dumped his fucking ashes down a sewer.”

Vera shakes her head, scoffing.

“You think I didn’t do what I could? Didn’t try to help you?”

I let out a sharp, bitter, incredulous laugh.

“Were *you* ever down here, Lyra?” she whispers.

My stomach turns.

“Were you ever in one of the cages playing fucking *dress up* with him?" she asks coldly. "Bleeding and crying as he raped you raw with chains around your neck?”

My eyes squeeze shut, and I turn away as bile rises within me.

“*No*,” Vera hisses. “You weren't." Her nostrils flare, her grip tightening on the gun. “I did what I had to do. What I had to do to survive.”

“It was your *job* to protect me!!” I scream at her. “You're my MOTHER!"

“She’s not.”

I gasp, whipping my head around.

Carmine’s voice is low and shaky, but his words cut through me like a blade.

Suddenly, I can’t move. Can’t even think.

His head is still tilted forward, blood trailing down his temple, but his eyes are locked steadily on mine.

“Vera isn’t your mother,” he rasps, not taking his eyes off me. “Arkadi wasn’t your father. And Alison…” He swallows. “She wasn’t your aunt.”

The room tilts.

My pulse skips a beat.

“Alison was your mother, Lyra.”

The words hit like a wrecking ball, crushing my ribs, punching through my lungs, cracking my spine.

Carmine keeps going as my stomach drops into freefall.

“Her name was Alison Vos.” His voice is relentless, cutting the last fragile threads of my sanity. “She went missing twenty-three years ago, not far from here—just a few towns away, actually.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, my fingers curling into the ropes at my wrists.

No.

“It was initially assumed that she fell into the Hudson while rock climbing,” Carmine murmurs. “But…” He grits his teeth, raising his eyes to let his gaze sweep eloquently over the room.

I feel like I’m drowning.

“No,” I whisper. “That’s not—”

But I already know it’s true.

The necklace. The photo. Everything.

It all clicks into place, in the worst possible way.

Vera sinks into a chair suddenly, like her knees just gave out. She looks… haggard. Worn. Haunted.

“Alison was one of his first,” she says quietly. “And she was pregnant.” Vera's voice is tired and monotone. She lifts her eyes, her lips tight. “You

were born here, Lyra," she says quietly. "In this very room."

This time, there's no stopping it. I turn my head and throw up violently, all over the floor.

"You have no idea what it was like," Vera whispers as I dry heave, spitting bile onto the cement. Her voice is full of an emotion I can't quite place—guilt, grief, or maybe something heavier than both.

"I was *his*, Lyra. He owned me. I never once had a choice." She swallows, dragging a trembling hand through her hair. "You think I *wanted* to watch? To know?" Her eyes flick to mine, and for the first time, I see a glimmer of humanity in them, however haunted and broken. "I knew what he was doing. I always knew."

My throat closes.

"Then *why*—" My voice splinters.

"He had a way of making you believe he was the only thing keeping you safe." Vera exhales sharply, her shoulders curling inward, shrinking in on herself. "Even when he was the one destroying you." She shakes her head. "You don't understand what it was like to be trapped in his world. To be in too deep to claw your way out. I should've fought harder. But—"

Her voice cuts off, her jaw tightening. Then she takes a deep, shaky breath and lifts her chin. "She had you right there, in that corner," Vera murmurs, nodding toward the shadows in the back of the room. "She lasted two weeks. Long enough to hold you. Long enough for a photo. And then… She died."

I can't breathe.

"She never got to leave this place," Vera whispers, her voice distant, lost somewhere I can't reach. "But I raised you like you were mine. I did my best."

"Yes, you raised her like a daughter. But you never tried to get her out," Carmine snarls. "You never tried to change her situation."

Vera's face twists, fury flashing in her eyes.

“I DID TRY!” she screams, her voice fracturing, breaking apart. “You don’t know what I went through! What I had to do to *survive him*!”

The last word rip out of her like a dying breath.

“I *tried*!” she chokes. “I—”

The lights flicker. Then suddenly, the whole room is plunged into total darkness.

“Fucking breakers,” Vera mutters bitterly. Her phone flashlight illuminates the floor and her own feet as she stands. She stomps across the room, the phone light swinging up to a circuit breaker box set into the concrete wall. She opens it, flips a heavy switch, and the lights flicker back on with a buzzing sound.

"She did try to help you, Lyra."

The voice is like a knife driving slowly into my throat. Like cold steel slicing over my skin, flaying me open as I drown in my own screams and blood.

That voice shouldn’t exist outside of my nightmares. The man it belongs to is *dead*. Cremated. His ashes thrown down a sewer.

The whole world goes numb and cold as slowly, like in a dream or underwater, I start to swivel my head around.

"She left the door open for you that day.”

Suddenly, I’m looking the Devil himself in the eye.

His lips curl into a dark, predatory smile.

“Good to see you again, *moya dorogaya doch’*,” my father growls quietly.

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CARMINE

THE ROOM GOES TOTALLY SILENT, like the haunted silence of a graveyard at midnight, or in the aftermath of a gunshot.

Lyra's eyes are wide, her body rigid, catatonic. Vera looks like she’s staring death in the face.

I could wonder about the fact that we’re all staring at and talking to an impossibility. But there’s no time for that. Instead, I take it all in, blood still trickling from my temple, my mind racing to see any possible way out.

Arkadi takes a slow step forward, scanning the room like a king surveying his realm. His dark hair, now silvered in places, is longer than it was in the last photos taken of him in prison. His face is more lined and worn.

I remember this motherfucker’s trial and the women that flocked to him, both online or outside the courtroom. As if he was some sort of heartthrob celebrity and not a monster who would rape and kill those women’s own daughters without thinking twice.

But those charming looks of his are fading. He’s grown older, haggard.

More monstrous.

His gaze drifts to Vera, his lips curling in disgust. “You let her see,” he murmurs, his voice full of hatred. “My demons are for me and me alone to bear,” Arkadi growls. “But you—you had the *audacity* to allow my own daughter to see—”

“She’s not your fucking daughter,” I snarl, my voice laced with steel and venom. “You stole her. You killed her mother—”

“Her mother would have succumbed to this world anyway,” he says lazily, shrugging. “She was too nice. Too *trusting*. She would’ve been swallowed up and spit back out.”

Arkadi exhales, shaking his head before his gaze slides viciously to Vera, who's pinned to the wall, looking terrified.

Then, before anyone can react, Arkadi makes his move toward her.

Vera bolts, panicked, making a desperate run for the back room to barricade herself in.

She doesn’t make it.

Arkadi lunges after her, slamming into Lyra’s chair in the process, knocking it over.

I snarl, baring my teeth as the woman I love cries out when she hits the ground hard, her head smacking against the concrete. A sharp gasp escapes her lips, her body writhing from the impact.

I see red but force myself to stay focused. Across the room, Arkadi is laughing coldly as he grabs Vera in his big hands. He wraps one of them around her throat, then his fingers tighten and her face begins to turn purple.

He’s distracted.

I twist, my voice a low whisper as I hiss at Lyra.

“Knife. Under my cuff.”

Lyra winces as she shifts against the ropes, her back to me, fingers feeling blindly, so close to my shoe.

I grit my teeth, pulling on my bonds as I try to extend my leg toward her.

She strains to reach back, her fingertips clawing at my shoe and hem of my pants before finally, her fingers find the hilt of the knife. Trembling but determined, she yanks it free, the metal glinting in the dim light.

Vera lets out a gurgled gasp, her feet kicking the air as Arkadi tightens his grip around her throat, his focus still completely locked on her.

Lyra doesn't hesitate.

She starts sawing clumsily at the rope around her wrists.

Her hands are slick with sweat, but she keeps going. I wince as the blade nicks her once, twice, a third time, but she pushes on, gritting her teeth, sawing the blade faster, faster.

With a harsh snap, the ropes break free.

Good girl.

Then she cuts the duct tape around her ankles and whirls to me. I shake my head.

"*Get out*!" I hiss.

"*No*!" she whispers back. "Not without—"

I shake my head. "Get the *fuck* out of here! My keys are in the car."

She doesn't move. I can see it in her eyes—she's hesitating. She wants to free me. But there's no time for that.

"*Get. Out*." My voice is low, desperate.

She still doesn't move.

Then I know what I have to do.

"I love you."

It punches into her, stopping her breath. Her eyes widen, her lips part in shock.

"Now—*RUN*!" I roar.

The sheer volume shocks her into action.

Lyra spins and bolts for the stairs just as Arkadi whirls. I watch confusion turn to rage on his face. Instantly, he drops Vera's inert body to ground in a

heap, and his eyes lock on Lyra as she scrambles up the steps.

Suddenly, he’s lunging after her.

I move before I can think.

Still bound to the chair, I force myself up, every muscle on fire.

With a snarl, I hurl myself into Arkadi, slamming into his side and smashing us both against the wall. The impact knocks the wind out of us and sends us both crashing to the ground. The chair splinters beneath me, the legs snapping.

I barely hear it.

All I can hear is Lyra’s fading footsteps.

Run, little dancer.

Arkadi snarls, twisting beneath me. As he shoves me off, his lip curls savagely.

“*I know what you are*,” he hisses as I grapple with him, trying to yank my arms free of the rope still wrapped around the broken pieces of chair. “I've *seen* what you are.” He barks a cold laugh as he rams his elbow into my mouth, bringing a gush of blood to my tongue. “You want to sit here calling me monster for the things I’ve done? Best to make sure the glass walls are nice and clean in that house of yours that you and your friends from the Black Court sit in.”

My whole body stiffens.

Arkadi laughs darkly and grins maniacally at me, even as I yank a hand free and slam my fist into his face.

“I was a guard at a few of those *stage shows* you and your little friends put on, with the masks…the women…the blood.” He leers at me, barely looking away when I punch him again. “I saw *everything*, Don Barone,” he growls.

“I already had motivation enough bury you in a shallow fucking grave,” I snarl back, ramming my forearm against his nose and making blood spurt

across his face. “But I’m going to enjoy it even more now when—”

Words fail me as a flash of silver glints.

As sudden, searing pain jabs into my side.

Shit.

I groan, my body locking up as the blade sinks deep. White-hot agony explodes through my ribs.

Arkadi lets out a low, satisfied chuckle, twisting the blade, laughing as I hiss in agony. He shoves me off him, sending me toppling to the floor in a heap with the blade still buried in my side.

“You’re a monster just like me, Don Barone,” he murmurs, getting to his feet and walking calmly over to where I’m writhing on the floor. “And you’ve made the same mistake I made once.”

He leans in, his lips brushing my ear.

“*You've pretended that you can be normal*.”

The words cut more than I want them to.

“You and I… We are not normal men. We are not sheep, like the rest of the world. We are *wolves*. And try as he might, a wolf can never live amongst the lambs. If he attempts to do so, it’s only a matter of time before his true nature is revealed.”

He flicks the hilt of the knife with a finger, chuckling to himself as I choke in pain.

“It’s deep. But you have some time. Time enough for me to bring back what is mine. What was always meant to be mine.”

My vision flickers, darkening at the edges, and my teeth grit as he leans closer.

“And when I do, I’ll have to decide: do I let you bleed out with her watching, or keep *you* alive long enough to watch *her* die…”

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LYRA

I BURST OUT THE DOOR, my feet barely touching the ground as I sprint from the house of nightmares.

My eyes snap to Carmine's Lamborghini, parked at the edge of the driveway. I hurl myself at it, my fingers fumbling on the door handle before I yank it open and slide into the driver's seat. My hands shake violently as I grab the wheel.

I don't *actually* know how to drive.

Guess I'm going to have to learn fast.

The roar of the engine shatters the silence as I jam the car into reverse. Then the front door to the house slams open, and Arkadi staggers onto the front porch.

His face and hands are dripping with blood, but I can't think about what that means right now.

I do the only thing I can: I slam my foot down on the pedal as hard as I can.

Instantly, the car lurches backward violently, tires spinning on the gravel, slipping out of my control.

The car skids sideways, veering right, then left, then the world tilts when the rear tires tip into the deep drainage ditch that runs parallel to the driveway.

I spin the wheel, but it’s too late. The back of the Lamborghini slams into a tree with a brutal, crunching sound.

Pain explodes through my skull as I lurch forward, hitting my head on the dashboard. For a moment, all I hear is the ringing in my ears.

When I force myself to open my eyes and look up through the cracked windshield, my pulse spikes instantly.

Arkadi is storming across the yard toward me.

A fresh wave of terror rips through me. I fumble with the door handle, my fingers slipping as I scramble to get free. Finally I manage to get out, stumbling and still disoriented as I fall to my knees in the dirt.

I scramble to my feet, bolting for the dark, inky blackness of the trees. My feet pound the dry underbrush, branches whipping at my face and arms as I crash into the forest. My breath comes in ragged, panicked bursts, but I don’t dare stop.

Behind me, I can hear him, getting closer.

“You don’t have to run, Lyra!” Arkadi’s voice snakes through the trees, enveloping me like a suffocating fog. “You were meant for more than this! Is this all you want to be?” he roars. “Some accessory for a man you were forced to marry!?”

I push harder, my muscles screaming. The branches claw at me, but I don’t slow.

“Don’t fight your destiny.” His voice is closer now, his tone low and persuasive. “There are sheep and there are wolves, Lyra. I raised you to be a wolf. *Like me*.”

“You didn’t raise me!” I choke out.

A dark chuckle. “Didn’t I? I *made* you. I shaped you!”

I trip on a root, almost going down before I catch myself. I can’t keep up this pace forever. He’s faster.

“How did my mother die?!” I scream into the night, desperately gasping for air.

Arkadi is stalking through the brush, his presence a shadow behind every tree.

“You want me to lie to you, don't you,” he growls. “Make it nice. But I won’t do that. She died *screaming*, Lyra.”

A choked, shattered sound claws its way out of my throat.

Arkadi’s voice doesn’t stop. “She fought, though. Oh, she fought. I almost admired her for it. But in the end, she was soft. She was weak.”

My hands ball into fists.

“I won’t apologize for what I am, Lyra,” Arkadi growls. “I am a wolf. As are you.”

“I am *nothing* like you!” I scream, my voice ripping through the trees.

Arkadi’s laugh is low, guttural. “You might not be my blood,” he murmurs, his footsteps getting closer. “But I raised you. I *am* you.”

“*How did my mother die*?!”

The rustling stops.

I hold my breath, my pulse pounding against my ribs.

Then, Arkadi’s voice slices through the night.

“With my fingers around her throat, and a pathetic cry for mercy on her lips.”

Something inside me snaps and breaks.

My hand closes around a thick fallen branch, bark splintering beneath my grip. I press myself against a tree, my fingers tightening around the wood, hefting it experimentally.

Waiting.

“Don’t mourn a woman you literally never knew!” Arkadi roars.

He’s close now.

I grip the broken tree branch tighter.

“And don’t cling to a future you were forced into! You could be so much more than—”

I steel myself as Arkadi stalks past the tree I’m hiding behind. Then, with a roar, I swing the branch with every ounce of strength I have left.

It slams into his stomach, making him double over with a vicious grunt.

Before he can recover, I swing again, this time catching him in the face. His head whips to the side, blood spurting from his mouth as he collapses into the dead leaves.

I turn, and I run.

The sound of footsteps pounding right behind me sends ice up my spine. I push faster, legs pumping, blood roaring, skin burning with adrenaline and fear as I burst into a clearing.

Then all I know is pain.

He slams into me from behind, tackling me face-first into the ground. The force knocks the wind out of me, and suddenly, he’s rolling me onto my back and straddling me, his weight crushing my ribs as I look up into his manic, twisted face in the moonlight.

His hands clamp around my throat.

“Join me,” he snarls. “I can teach you to be like me.”

His grip tightens. My eyes bulge and my vision blurs.

“Or you can die like your insignificant mother.”

I thrash, clawing at his grip. But my body is fading.

No.

No, no, *no*.

I won’t die here. Not like this.

Arkadi’s fingers dig in to my neck. They squeeze. And squeeze.

My vision starts to go dark at the corners. Black spots swim in my vision as I flail and try to slap his arms away.

“When you see your mother,” he growls quietly, a sick glint in his eyes as he looms over me. “Tell her that she was one of my fav—”

He frowns.

So do I. I can’t figure out why the fuck the air is suddenly so full of smoke that it burns my eyes.

The hands around my neck loosen just enough for me to twist my head to the side. My brain is still foggy. I can still barely breathe. But that doesn’t stop the question, drumming endlessly in my mind.

Why is the world on fire?

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CARMINE

WHEN I WAS FIFTEEN, Pop took me to Canada, to hunt wolves.

He told me we were going because *his* father had taken him a few times when he was younger. But I knew there was a more…*pressing* reason.

He brought me to the woods to allow me to give into my urges. To let me kill.

I appreciated the gesture. I was at the age when I was starting to realize that the black thoughts I had, together with my inability to latch onto certain situations—emotionally speaking—made me…different.

Except I didn't have a need to murder people or anything, like some bad *Dexter* spinoff. It's just that the idea of killing something or someone didn't bother me. If it was necessary to protect one's family and loved ones, or oneself? What was the hesitation? In my mind, killing to protect my own was like reaching for a spoon to eat the soup in front of me.

It was just…obvious.

Pop and I ended up having a good talk about the whole "my brain is fucky and a little broken" situation. And instead of letting his psycho son run amok with his bloodlust urges, he taught me how to hunt. Properly.

With patience. Control. Holding back when necessary and *not* acting on the first impulse that crosses your mind.

The wound in my side pulses with every movement, every breath, but I don’t really feel it. I will later, but not yet, not while Lyra is still out there.

I scan the ground, my eyes piercing the darkness.

Crushed leaves. A snapped twig. A drop of blood glistening on a branch.

…I should mention that Pop and I have gone back to Canada to hunt wolves almost every year since that first one. And I am very, *very* fucking good at hunting.

That includes tracking.

My gaze follows the trail of blood through the trees, locking onto the details. The way the droplets are getting farther apart—he’s started to move faster.

Arkadi was blathering on earlier about being some sort of apex predator at the top of the food chain. A "wolf”.

A smile curls dangerously at the corners of my mouth.

I *know* how to fucking hunt wolves.

You don’t chase them—you trap them. You cut off their exits.

I turn, heading back up the driveway toward the car, crashed against a tree. I ignore the blood loss and the sting of torn muscles and skin. I also ignore what I left in the passenger seat.

I pop the trunk, grabbing the spare gas can and a road flare.

Then I turn back to the woods, where the trail picks up again, and I start running.

My breath is steady. My boots silent.

I keep tracking: footprints, broken branches, any signs of a struggle. My pulse stays even. My grip on the gas canister in my hands stays steady.

The trees blur past. I can hear Arkadi's and Lyra’s voices in the distance. He’s taunting her, twisting her mind, trying to convince her she belongs with him.

I don’t need to get to them.

I just need to make sure he has nowhere to run.

I pop the cap of the gas can, moving fast, cutting a wide arc through the trees. My fingers skim the branches as I move.

Bone dry. No rain or snow for weeks.

Perfect.

I freeze when I hear a yell and the dull thud of wood smashing into flesh. Then I hear Arkadi’s roar of fury, followed by another hit and another wrenching cry from his fucking mouth, and I grin savagely.

That’s my girl.

I keep running, pouring the rest of the gas in a thick, wide circle.

Then I pull the flare from my pocket.

I smile grimly as I remember what I told her once. Then I strike the flare, letting it roar to life in my hand, turning the woods around me demonically red.

Fire ignites instantly when I drop the flare into the trail of gas I’ve poured through the trees. The dry underbrush catches in a vicious wildfire, flames roaring through the forest like living things.

I don’t stop moving.

The wind is in my favor. The blaze spreads back through the path I just took, devouring the forest in a violent inferno.

The night turns red and gold, smoke thick in the air like the fucking apocalypse.

Then I hear it.

Lyra, crying out.

I bolt toward the sound, heat licking at my back as the fire explodes almost out of control, devouring the world behind me.

I smash through the underbrush and burst into the clearing—

And my vision goes red.

Arkadi is kneeling over Lyra’s limp body, his hands wrapped around her throat.

For just a second my mind blanks, my heart stops beating, and rage detonates through me when I think that I’m too late and he’s already taken her from me.

But then I see her loll her head to the side, eyes dazed, blinking at the fire.

And her gaze finds mine.

I’m already moving. Already with pure diesel and death burning in my veins as I hurtle toward them like an extinction-level asteroid.

I hit Arkadi so hard that my vision blanks out for a second. But I don’t need to be able to see to wrench him off her, sending us both crashing into the dirt.

My vision returns as he scrambles to his feet, blood dripping from his mouth as he raises his eyes to me.

He looks like he’s about to shit himself when he truly sees me.

The fire roars behind me like a demon from hell as we square off, my blood pumping, my body ready.

The need for violence consuming me.

Arkadi whirls, looking in bewilderment at the inferno slowly wrapping around the clearing and trapping us in its deathly embrace.

His breath becomes shaky. Uneven.

"What have you done?" he chokes.

He stumbles back, smoke curling around him, flames reflected in his wild, bloodshot eyes. His chest rises and falls rapidly, his fingers twitching at his sides, like he’s trying to find a way out. A last move. But there isn’t one. Not for him.

I advance on him slowly and methodically, my face devoid of emotion.

“So,” he sneers, his hoarse and mocking tone masking his fear, “are you going to take me to your little underground club now? Make me stand trial?” He flashes a taunting grin. “What is it, again? *Fight or flight*?”

I level my gaze at him, my chest rising and falling with slow, controlled breaths. I take one step forward. Then a second.

“You could stand trial for your crimes,” I murmur, voice like steel. My fingers flex at my sides, my body thrumming.

Another step.

“But I’m not here for those.”

I keep moving, slowly, deliberately. Every step is a verdict. A final nail in his fucking coffin.

Arkadi’s sneer falters, just slightly.

“I’m here because you laid hands on and hurt *my wife*.” My voice doesn’t raise, but there’s pure lethality in it.

I watch his throat bob. Good, good. Let him feel it. Let him see the end coming.

Another step, closer now.

Arkadi licks his lips, his eyes flicking to the fire. Looking for escape that isn't there.

“No, Arkadi.” I shake my head slowly. “When you get to hell, you can ask whoever the fuck you meet there if they want to play fight or flight, I don’t really give a fuck.” My voice drops lower, steady and absolute. “But in this world, up here?”

I pull the knife—his own knife—from my waistband, the blade gleaming in the firelight as I smile coldly at him.

“Up here, I’ve already found you guilty of the most egregious crime I know.” My grip tightens. My pulse stays even. “Hurting what’s *mine*.”

Arkadi’s teeth bare. "You're a monster, just like me," he snarls.

I tilt my head. Then, slowly, I smile.

“No.” My voice is almost amused as I shake my head. “I’m *far* worse.”

Before he can react, I explode forward.

The knife rams into his stomach in an instant, deep and brutal.

Arkadi chokes on blood as I yank the blade free, twisting it in my grip. He stumbles, clutching at his gut, his eyes wide, disbelieving.

His lips part, but I don’t let him speak.

I drive the blade up through his jaw with a sickening crunch. Arkadi jerks violently, his body spasming, then he goes still.

I let go of him, and I don’t bother watching him hit the ground.

I turn and go back to Lyra.

She’s still limp, battered and bruised as she lies sprawled on the ground. But when I scoop her up, she's able to smile a little when her eyes lift to mine.

"You lit the world on fire for me,” she murmurs, barely conscious.

I press a kiss to her hair. "Who knew I was such a romantic."

Then I start to run. The fire is closing in, consuming everything. We’re both coughing, covered in soot, and maybe a little singed when I crash through the underbrush and lurch out of the forest back into the driveway of her old home. I slow, carrying her gently to the car as sirens wail in the distance.

"I'm sorry, love,” I sigh.

She frowns. “For?”

“You’re going to have to share the front seat.”

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CARMINE

One week later:

THE SHADOWS SWALLOW me up as I move, my steps deliberate, predatory. The pavement is slick beneath my boots, the air heavy with the promise of more rain. Ahead, my target moves toward his car. Alone.

That’s a mistake. He should know better.

I stalk closer, unblinking, keeping to the edges of the alley beside the restaurant.

This is the last piece of unfinished business. Arkadi is dead—for real this time. The ensuing fire that I set in the forest ended up consuming Lyra's old house, too. Which, honestly, I view as a net positive.

Lyra feels the same way.

The fire razed more than the house and the foreclosed ones nearby. It also cleared parts of the woods that the search teams had missed seven years ago. Arkadi was convicted of twelve counts of murder for the twelve bodies they found after Lyra ran screaming from the house, but it was always suspected that there were more victims.

The fire I set that day took that theory and blew the roof off it, exposing the final resting places of *thirteen* more bodies.

Add those to the two other bodies found in the house of the “copycat killer” in New Jersey. Which turned out not to be a copycat at all.

Apparently, Arkadi couldn’t shake those old habits.

Amongst the bodies found in Kingston, though, was Alison Vos, Lyra's mother.

Which brings me to one of my least favorite topics: her *fake* mother.

Vera. Who is *not* dead.

I don’t know why—maybe it was a mistake—but when I saw her lying in that basement after Arkadi choked the fuck out of her, I ended up crouching down and pressing two fingers to her throat.

There was a pulse. Weak. Fading. But there.

For reasons that are still beyond me, I didn’t let her die.

I didn’t patch her up, didn’t tend to her or comfort her. I just hauled her dead weight out of the house, shoved her into the passenger seat of my car, and left her there while I went to save my wife and murder the fuck out of Arkadi.

That was what—*who*—Lyra had to share the front seat with.

But, as much as I’ve frequently second-guessed myself for saving that waste of oxygen, Vera had answers when she woke up.

Like confirming that the man in the shitty suit she met that day *was*, in fact, an FBI agent.

Apparently Arkadi wasn’t just a monster. He was a businessman, too.

He’d been selling underworld secrets to the Feds for years—feeding them intel on the mafia, the Bratva, even The Black Court. It turns out he was telling the truth when he told me he’d been hired as security at a couple of our trials. So he’d seen things he shouldn’t have. And *that* meant, eventually, he had leverage.

But then he died…or, you know, “*died*”.

And when everyone, including the FBI and Vera, thought he was dead, that steady flow of cash from the Bureau dried up.

Vera wanted it back.

She didn’t care about morality, loyalty, or justice. She just cared about money.

So she picked up where Arkadi left off: she reached back out to Arkadi’s old FBI contact, offering her services. But she didn’t have anything to sell. Not really. She tried to sell some old, outdated information about a couple of mafia families to Arkadi’s old handler—like the thumb drive The Stag saw her exchange. But it wasn’t going to bring in any real money.

That’s where Lyra came in.

Vera began texting Lyra, pretending to be Arkadi, playing on her fear and paranoia. She needed information. She didn’t actually know shit about the Black Court or what it was. She just knew the FBI was interested, and that my name was associated with it somehow. But she needed something, anything, to hand over to the Feds to get herself on the payroll. And she had no qualms about using her own daughter to get it.

But that still leaves ones loose end.

It wasn’t Vera, because she truly thought he’d died. But s*omeone* helped Arkadi escape. *Someone* helped him fake his own death. And that someone —the prison medical examiner, the one who signed his death certificate before himself later turning up dead—was on the *Nikolayev* payroll.

And I would *very much* like to know why.

Which brings me to the present as I creep closer to my prey, my grip tightening around the knife at my hip.

Ahead of me, Kir exhales heavily, shaking his head as he nears his car.

"Would it kill you to approach a man in a normal fashion just once?” he mutters. “A handshake? A hello?"

I step from the shadows, my eyes locked onto his.

"I think we can assume that your would-be career as a forest ranger has been permanently shelved," he quips dryly.

I don't dignify that with a response.

"You have my congratulations for killing that piece of shit," Kir says smoothly. "And my thanks for saving Lyra."

"I didn’t save her for you," I growl.

Kir’s smirk widens. " I wouldn’t imagine you would. But you have my thanks nonetheless." He studies me carefully. "May I ask what this dramatic visit is regarding?"

I cross the distance between us, stopping a foot away. "The prison medical examiner," I say flatly. "He was on your payroll."

“Of course he was.”

He doesn’t even bother denying it.

"Did you help that motherfucker escape?" I bite out.

Kir sighs through his nose, meticulously adjusting the sleeves of his jacket. "I have many people like that on my payroll. Surely that isn’t surprising to you. And you may recall,” he mutters, “that I helped put that monster *in* prison."

"You also helped put a target on Lyra’s back," I snap.

Kir’s lip curls slightly, his gaze turning to ice.

"I did what needed to be done," he says, voice calm. "Just as you did. But I was not a part of that motherfucker escaping prison."

Tension coils thick between us, wrapping around the night air like smoke.

My fingers twitch. My knife is *right there*.

"Careful, Carmine," he murmurs. "You’re not the only predator in the woods."

I shift closer, my voice dropping to a low, lethal murmur.

"And you’re not as untouchable as you think you are."

Kir exhales a quiet laugh, shaking his head, before stepping close and then leaning even closer. “While you boys are playing games with masks and mazes,” he murmurs, “the men are out here conquering the fucking world.”

His hand claps firmly against my arm. “Take care of her,” he says.

"Don't go fucking near her," I mutter back, my voice a quiet, razor-edged threat.

Kir pulls back, smirking slightly. He doesn’t say another word. Just turns, gets into his car, and drives off.

I stand there, watching his taillights fade into the night.

* * *

THE HOUSE IS dark when I slip inside. Silent, too, though that doesn’t extend to the inside of my head.

There’s no such thing as silence in my head now—not since the fire, when I almost lost her.

I move through the shadows, my body still aching, my stitches pulling with every step. But the pain isn't important. The only thing that matters is Lyra's warm presence waiting upstairs, tucked safely between my sheets.

I climb the stairs without a sound, each step bringing me closer. There’s a restless, hungry feeling inside me, one that starts and ends with her.

I push open the bedroom door, exhaling slowly when I see her. She’s curled up on her side, one hand tucked under her cheek, her red hair spilling across my pillow. Vicious possessiveness rises inside me, dark and primal.

I don’t wake her. Not yet.

I step closer, my fingers trailing over the sheets. I grip them and tug them down until I can see all of her, lying there in just a thin t-shirt and a lacy pink thong.

I run a finger over the bare skin of her thigh. She stirs slightly, a soft sound escaping her lips, but she still doesn’t wake.

I peel the lace down and off her legs, taking my time, memorizing the way her breath hitches in her sleep. I bring the thong to my nose, my cock throbbing as I inhale the scent of her pussy, her skin, her everything.

I strip naked, the cool air whispering over my heated skin as I move over her, covering her, caging her.

She shifts again, a breathless murmur falling from her lips as I trail my fingers between her thighs. I find her already wet, already soft and warm. My jaw clenches as I stroke her, teasing her, feeling her body react even in sleep.

I dip two fingers between her lips, stroke up and down, feel her grow even wetter.

What a greedy little pussy.

I pull my fingers away, rubbing her slickness between them before I smear it over the swollen head of my cock.

It’s not until I’ve lined us up, ready to slide into her wet, eager heat, that I grab her discarded panties and push them into her mouth.

Her eyes snap open, wide with confusion. But the second my hips snap forward, plunging into her deep and hard, her muffled cry turns into a moan of pleasure.

Yeah, if the panties in her mouth didn’t wake her up, every thick inch of my cock thrusting into her eager little cunt sure the fuck should.

“Even in sleep, this messy little pussy wants me,” I groan. "You’re dripping for me, baby. You love this. You love being taken before you’re even fully awake."

She moans and drools a reply into the soaked lace stuffed into her mouth.

I fist her hair, keeping her exactly where I want her, my other hand braced beside her head as I move. Hard. Unrelenting. Possessive. Pounding into her, fucking her greedy little pussy.

She whines, her body arching underneath me, her legs scissoring against the mattress as I drive into her. The bed creaks. Our breaths tangle, the sheets twisting beneath us as we move, crashing together over and over.

Faster. Rougher. Deeper.

Her nails dig into the bed, her lace-muffled cries growing louder, breaking apart.

I grip her throat, drowning in her as I feel her pulse pounding against my palm. I want her ruined for anyone but me.

"Tell me you’re mine. Scream it into your fucking panties like a good girl while I fuck you so deep you’ll still feel my cock tomorrow."

Lyra shudders, her walls squeezing me over and over as she moans into her thong.

"You’re so fucking tight, baby. Like you were made to take me and only me.” I lean down and sink my teeth into her shoulder, making her squeal as her pussy clamps down tight around my cock. "The only thing better than fucking you is watching you come for me, over and over."

I keep ramming into her, fucking her into the bed until it’s a savage, frenzied race for both of us. When she finally shatters, her body spasming around me, I immediately follow, a guttural sound tearing from my throat as I bury myself deep, owning her completely.

She goes limp, her breath returning in slow, dreamy gasps after I pull the lace from her mouth and kiss her deeply. She rolls us over, her cheek pressed against my chest, her fingers tracing over my ribs.

I should say something. Tell her what I’m thinking.

That I’ll always be a monster.

That I don’t regret what I did.

And that I’d burn the world again to keep her at my side.

But before I can say shit, she turns her head, looking up at me. There’s no hesitation in her voice, no doubt in her eyes.

“I love you.”

My response is automatic and easy.

“I love you, too.”

And for the first time in my life, I don’t just say it—I *feel* it, raw and unshakable.

More real than anything I’ve ever known.

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EPILOGUE

LYRA

Three months later:

THERE'S STILL a hint of winter clinging to the air. But spring is on the way, and you can feel that particular lightness in the air that says the seasons are shifting.

That change is inevitable.

How fitting.

Vera sits next to me on a wooden bench, her hands wrapped around a mug of coffee. She looks different. The usual bitterness in her face has softened, and there's something else there too. Reality settling in, maybe. Clarity. Probably regret.

"How's sobriety going?" I ask, tucking my hands into my coat pockets.

Vera grimaces. "Sucks."

She shakes her head, looking down at her hands with a wry smile.

"But… I'm happy for it. For the first time in a long time, I'm glad not to be numb all the time, to feel something, even if it's shit I'd rather not feel." She exhales slowly, rubbing a thumb over the rim of the mug. "I put every

feeling I had into a black box for so long that I forgot what it's like to actually feel them."

I study her carefully. "And how's that going for you?"

Vera smirks sourly. "Also sucks."

I smile faintly. "Honesty looks good on you."

She sighs. "That's the point, though, isn't it. To feel the shitty parts and work on them so you can become a better person, day by day." She gestures vaguely around us. "That's what they tell me in Group, anyway."

The high fences, the locked gates, the ever-present security… Yeah, this isn't some luxury treatment center tucked away in the Hamptons. This is court-ordered, long-term recovery.

When the fire consumed our old house, revealing the thirteen other bodies buried around it including my birth mother, and confirming what everyone had long suspected, namely that Arkadi's crimes were even worse than first thought, Vera didn't hide from it.

She admitted everything. Confessed every time she turned a blind eye or facilitated his crimes because she was too scared…or too weak…to stop him. She owned her part in it. Now, she's paying for it. This place is the halfway point between consequence and redemption.

"You know," I murmur, shifting on the bench, "we could look into moving you somewhere…nicer."

Vera shakes her head. "Nah. I deserve a lot worse."

She turns, meeting my gaze directly. "I've done a lot of bad shit, Lyra," she says quietly. "Not to mention, I was a *lousy* mother."

I huff a small laugh. "You weren't *that* bad…"

She smirks. "Yeah. I was."

She exhales, rubbing her coffee mug again before looking at me, weary sincerity in her expression. "And I need to atone for that. That's not a

simple ‘sorry.’ I’m learning here that it’s going to take time. Even then, I don’t think I’ll ever make it up to you entirely.”

I study her for a moment. “But you’re trying,” I finally say. “And that counts for something.”

She nods slowly. “Thanks. I hope so.”

Silence stretches between us, not quite comfortable, not quite tense. Just there.

Finally, she clears her throat. “Lyra, if I stay here instead of putting in for a transfer to somewhere else…” She lifts a shoulder. “Will you come visit? Since it’s right outside the city?” Her voice drops slightly, like she’s afraid of the answer.

I tilt my head, contemplating. Then I shrug. “Maybe?”

She lets out a small breath, her lips twitching. “I’ll take that.”

* * *

THE RIDE back into the city is quiet. Carmine’s driver doesn’t say a word, and I’m grateful for that. My mind is too full. Of Vera. The past. What comes next.

But the moment we get home, all of that broodiness disappears. And the second I step inside, I don’t have time to think at all.

Because Carmine is already there, *pouncing* on me.

I let out a breathless giggle, pushing against his chest, but he doesn’t budge. His hands cage me in, his lips brushing my throat.

“I missed you, wife.”

I smirk. “Please. You saw me this morning.”

“That was at least three hours ago, which is *way* too fucking long.”

I shove him, laughing. “Our guests will be arriving soon. Including the newly minted Mr. and Mrs. De Luca.”

Carmine grins, his hands flexing on my waist. “Fuck, that’s seriously going to take some getting used to. Oh, and I just talked to Nico. He’s on his way with—”

“Hey, Carmine?” I interrupt, grinning mischievously.

He arches a brow. “Yes, *dear*?”

I get up on my tiptoes, whispering against his lips. “We have fifteen minutes before our guests arrive. How about you shut up and fuck me?”

His grin turns savage. “I'd better hear a please from that mouth, or I’m going to forcibly fill it with something else.”

I ostentatiously clamp my lips shut, saying nothing.

His grin darkens. "Now you're in trouble, little dancer."

“Promise?” I whisper, shivering as his fingers glide down my spine.

His eyes flash dangerously.

“*Promise*.”

* * *

The Darkest Dance series continues with Nico’s story in *Dance of Ruin*.

Haven’t gotten enough of Carmine and Lyra?
Get their extra scene here, or type this link into your browser:
https://BookHip.com/TXFPZWV

This isn’t an epilogue or continuation to *Dance of Deception.* But this extra hot “follow-up” story is guaranteed to keep the spice going.

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DEVIANT HEARTS

Thank you so much for reading *Dance of Deception*! If you enjoyed the book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review!

As mentioned, the Jagger Cole universe continues with Nico's story in *Dance of Ruin*. You can also get a glimpse of some of the other characters mentioned in this book (the Drakos and Kildare families) in the Dark Hearts series, starting with *Deviant Hearts*, a dark enemies-to-lovers, forced marriage mafia romance. There's even a sneak peek of that book on the following pages for you. If you're hungry for more secret societies, masks, and unhinged heroes, you can also jump into the Venomous Gods series starting with *Toxic Love*.

You can find complete book lists and suggested reading orders on my website.
www.jaggercolewrites.com

Scroll on for a sneak peek of *Deviant Hearts*.

* * *

Chapter 1
Neve

Fuck. Me.

He’s doing it.

Again.

I tell myself not to look. I tell myself to keep my eyes on the book and the study notes in front of me, because NYU seriously *does not care* what my last name is, and they’ll have no issue failing my sorry ass from my government and public policy master’s program if I don’t focus.

I tell myself it’s high time I bought some fucking curtains, so I can avoid this…*distraction.*..since it’s clearly shaping up to be a frequent thing.

But the problem with telling yourself not to do something that deep down you *really* want to?

The “deep down” part always wins. *Always*.

Or, at least it does with me. Which might say more about me and my own self-control…or lack thereof.

No. It’s definitely easier to go ahead and blame my new neighbor across the street. Let’s go with that.

I mean, *he’s* the one that keeps walking around naked in a penthouse made out of fucking *glass*.

Mark Twain once said, “There is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable.” But, smart as he was, it’s clear Mr. Twain never had the neighbor I do. If he had, I’m pretty sure he’d have taken a whole lot of the whimsical “charm” out of that statement.

And sure enough, despite my best—or, okay, let’s be real, *mediocre*—efforts, soon enough, my gaze shifts from the notes in front of me to the man across the steel canyon from me.

Sweet Jesus.

He’s a freaking *god*. Tall and lean, and as muscled as a superhero. Shoulders and arms built to take away your ability to speak. Chiseled abs and those grooved hip-muscle things that I don’t even know what they’re

called but they seem to be evolution's way of making even smart women go fucking stupid.

Tattoos for days. Deeply tanned, Mediterranean skin, with a shadow on his razor-sharp jaw, and dark, *perfectly* tousled hair.

It's like living next to a goddamn Avenger who models for Armani while he's not busy saving the world from Thanos. No wonder he seems to have a problem with wearing clothes.

Heat floods my cheeks as I glance across the chasm between us. The morning light streams right through his penthouse, which is another annoyance.

Two months ago, my place was a dream apartment. A modern, light-filled loft at the top of a thirty-eight-story building. So high up that I didn't even have neighbors who could see into this place.

Is it more than a little ostentatious? Well…*yeah*. It's a thousand square feet of modern glass and steel on the West Side overlooking the Hudson. Was it absurdly expensive? Also, yeah. But there's gotta be *some* perks that come with being a Kildare to offset the downsides.

Issues making friends my entire life because my family is the Irish Mafia? Check. Problems having any sort of romantic relationships, for the same reason? Check and double check.

Aimless, drifting, utterly unsure of what I want to do with my life, because what exactly *do* mafia princesses do all day?

Check and fucking mate.

For the last year, I've been throwing myself into this government and policy master's program at NYU. But after that? Who knows. For now, I'm at least finally living on my own.

But life still sort of feels just like something I'm drifting through.

Truth be told, I was pretty sure my uncle Cillian was going to shut down my plans of finally moving out of the main family house and into this place. Especially with all the violence and upheaval in the last few months as the

fighting between the Irish Kildare and Greek Drakos families escalated to world-war-three levels.

But my dream apartment and the building itself are incredibly secure and easy to defend. Especially when there's a rotating crew of four Kildare guys constantly guarding the lobby—much, I'm sure, to the chagrin of the other tenants.

Yet that whole "dream apartment" thing quickly lost some of its luster when they completed construction on the building across the street, next to mine. The building with the double-height glass penthouse that rises two floors *above* my thirty-eighth-floor apartment, that now blocks part of my view of the river.

His glass penthouse.

The man with the god-like body and the aversion to clothing. The man with the sensual tattoos and the swarthy, lean look of a Trojan warrior.

The man I have absolutely *no* business gawking at and thinking these sort of sinful thoughts about. Not just because it makes me a spying creep. But because he's a man I should have every reason in the world to hate.

He's not just my neighbor.

He's the *enemy*.

But try telling that to my under-satisfied libido and clenched thighs.

At last he moves from where he's been standing at the windows staring out at the Hudson with a cup of coffee in his hand and, mercifully, disappears from view.

Finally.

Distraction gone, I manage to pull my attention back to the study notes in front of me. Nina Simone croons over the sound system as I lose myself in the books. But a handful of minutes later, movement at my peripheral vision drags my eyes back up again. He's back. And wonder of wonders, he's dressed—in an impeccably-tailored dark suit. I yank my eyes back to my notes, then back to him.

This time, he’s finally gone.

I exhale slowly, swallowing as I drag my attention back to my government policy books. I don’t have time for these distractions. Not when I’ve got two weeks of notes to memorize and *also* a Kildare family meeting in…

I glance at my phone and groan.

Shit. In, basically, now. As if on cue, the buzzer goes off for my front door. Sighing, I close the books and pad across the living room. I glance through the peephole out of habit. Then I grin and open the door wide.

Eilish’s brows furrow as she looks me up and down.

“Neve, what the fuck. We’re going to be late, and you’re not even dressed?”

My brow scrunches as I glance down at myself.

“You need to get *dressed*, Neve,” my younger sister sighs.

“I’m dressed!”

“Those look like pajamas.”

“So? They’re comfy.” I raise my gaze past her to the tall guy standing behind her. “Cas, back me up here.”

But Castle just shakes his sandy blonde head and lifts a muscled shoulder apologetically.

“Cillian wants you dressed properly, kid.”

I roll my eyes at the word kid, but I let it go. Castle’s been Eilish’s and my —I suppose the word is “bodyguard”—for the last ten years. Growing up, all of our friends drooled over the six-and-a-half-foot tall, built-like-a-quarterback shadow that was always with us. That, or they were *sure* one of us was going to get scandalously tangled up in some steamy, x-rated tryst with him.

But, *no way*. No way to an “eww” degree. Yes, Castle is ridiculously handsome. But to Eilish and me he’s always been the older brother we never had. And we’re the perpetually annoying-but-loveable kid sisters *he* never had.

Which is why he can still get away with calling me “kid” or doing annoying big brother-type shit like messing up my hair even though I’m twenty-four.

I stick my bottom lip out, giving Castle my best puppy-dog eyes.

“But *Caaaastle*—”

“Enough with the waif eyes. Go get changed, Neve,” he grunts. “Your uncle isn’t exactly one to mince words, and he wants you dressed up.”

“But *why*? What’s this meeting even about?”

Eilish shrugs. “Beats me. Bet it has something to do with your new neighbor, though.”

Annoyed as I am to be forced to give up my sweatpants and hoodie, I know Castle well enough to know there’s no way he’s budging on this. And I know my Uncle Cillian well enough to know that one, there’s no wiggle room here, but more importantly two, there’s a reason he wants us looking sharp. Even if I have no idea what that reason is.

I root around in my disaster zone of a bedroom, stripping out of my hoodie and sweats and pulling on clean underwear and clothes. Five minutes later, I emerge in a green puff-sleeve top, black jeans, and heeled black boots, shoving my long red hair up in a loose ponytail.

Eilish, predictably, rolls her eyes.

“*That’s* dressed up?”

“I could go back to my extensive sweatpants collection, if you prefer.”

Eilish sighs, reaching up to smooth the single errant lock of blonde back behind her ear. She’s right. I’m still fairly casually dressed. Especially next to my princess of a little sister, who looks like a modern-day blonde Jackie-O in a pink Chanel jersey dress and heels, her hair and makeup immaculate. At *nine-thirty in the freaking morning*, no less. So sue me, this is the best I can do.

Finally, she grins as she rolls her eyes again.

“Okay, *okay*, fine. C’mon. We shouldn’t be late.”

“Hey, I’m not the one getting bent out of shape about the dress code.”

I glance to Castle for at least a chuckle. But he’s looking even more grim and stoic than usual.

“What’s up with you?”

He shrugs, turning away.

“Just don’t want to be late. C’mon.”

I frown. “Cas, seriously, what’s up?”

There’s a glint in his eye when he glances back at me for half a second. But still, he gives nothing away.

“Let’s get where we need to go, kid,” he murmurs quietly.

I shoot Eilish a puzzled look as we follow him out the door. But she just shakes her head and gives me an “I have no idea” face. Given that my sister is incapable of being anything but cheerful, talking shit about *anyone* no matter how terrible they are, or lying in any capacity, it’s clear she’s also in the dark.

Twenty minutes later, Castle is pulling the white armored Range Rover up to the curb outside O’Bannon’s. The midtown Irish pub has been our uncle’s temporary center of business and war room since he moved to New York from London a few months ago, after the petty scuffles between the Kildare family and the Drakos family turned into all-out war.

After things went nuclear, when the Drakos family lost Vasilis, their head of operations in New York, and we lost Declan, the head of ours.

Declan, as in, *my father*.

The side door to O’Bannon’s, which leads up to the second floor where Cillian’s been holding court the last few months, is guarded by four Kildare men with not-so-hidden bulges of sidearms under their dark jackets. One nods stiffly at Castle and goes to open the door to the bar for us, when suddenly there’s the sound of a car screeching to a stop at the curb behind us.

The hairs on the back of my neck start to prickle as I slowly turn to frown at the black Escalade. And when the back door opens, and a man in a dark suit with pure malice on his face steps out, my heart leaps into my throat.

"*RUN*!" I scream as I grab Eilish's arm, whirling to bolt into O'Bannon's before the bullets start flying.

Because I know damn well who the man who just stepped out of the SUV is. Hades Drakos: a dangerous, certifiable psychopath and second-in-command of the Drakos family. Basically, public enemy number two if your last name is Kildare.

As I yank my sister towards the door, I realize something odd: the guards aren't launching into action. Castle himself is just standing there, glowering at the second-oldest Drakos brother as he grins savagely at me.

"Cas?" I hiss hoarsely, my pulse thudding. Clearly, Eilish is just as out of the loop as I am, because she's still cowering behind me, shaking.

"It's okay, kid," Castle mutters quietly. He glances behind me, his look softening as it frequently does when it comes to Eilish. Which is totally understandable. I'm the sister with a chip on her shoulder and an axe to grind. Eilish is the sweet one. The one who's arguably *way* too soft for this dangerous world that we live in.

"But that's—!"

"*Boo*," Hades chuckles thinly, winking at me in a way that sends a shiver up my spine. He rolls his muscled shoulders, the tattoo ink that curls up from inside the collar of his dress shirt rippling as he buttons his jacket.

"Well, Pillow Fort. Can we go inside now?"

The creases in Castle's brow deepen as he squares off with Hades.

"It's Castle."

"I really don't give a shit. Are we doing this or not?"

I frown as I turn to Castle again.

"Doing *what*, Cas? What are we—"

“Open the doors.”

I stiffen at the deep, powerful voice that rumbles behind me. A voice that causes a tingling sensation to creep over my skin, electrifying me as deeply as it scares me. The feeling grows and throbs deeper and warmer, until I can feel my cheeks reddening as something wicked pools between my thighs.

I turn, and my core clenches tight.

It’s *him*.

My neighbor. The forbidden distraction. The man with the god-like body built for sin who I have no business fantasizing about, but God help me I do.

Because my neighbor isn’t just eye candy.

He’s *Ares fucking Drakos*, the brand-new king of the entire Drakos family.

I’m vaguely aware of more people getting out of a second and a third SUV that pull up behind the first—the other siblings in the Drakos family, and various other guards. As the seconds tick by, and as Ares’ piercing, dark-eyed gaze continues to stab right into me, the question of why he’s here fades into the background.

And the question of why he’s looking at me like he’s trying to figure out how to swallow me in one bite comes to the fore.

“Inside, all of you,” he growls quietly, his voice filled with unquestioned power. Two of his three brothers—Hades and Kratos—and his sister Calliope glance at me with slightly raised eyebrows as they file past me into O’Bannon’s. Their guards and the Kildare men follow.

Castle clears his throat, taking Eilish by the shoulders as if to escort her inside. I know I should go too. But somehow, I’m stuck. It’s as if my gaze is bound to Ares. Or as if *his* gaze has me pinned to the very pavement beneath my feet.

We’re on a busy New York sidewalk. And yet, it’s as if we’re suddenly in a bubble of silence. As if the entire rest of the world fades away to a low

hum, until I can actually hear my throat tightening when he starts to walk towards me.

I shiver when he stops right in front of me, looming over me. I want to sneer at him. Or spit on his fancy shoes. Or worse. But all I can do is purse my lips and glare at him.

Ares smirks down into my eyes.

“They haven’t told you yet, have they?”

I swallow.

“Told me *what*?”

One of his dark brows raises in amusement.

“Never mind. You’ll find out soon enough. You know who I am?”

“Of course I know who you are.”

“I mean, apart from being your neighbor.”

I stiffen, desperately trying to swallow back the heat from my face.

“Neighbor?” My voice cracks. Not badly, but enough. “I hadn’t realized.”

The dangerous and lethally-attractive man looming over me smiles ruthlessly, coldly.

“You don’t recognize me?”

“I—I guess not.”

“Would it help if I took my clothes off?”

Dear. GOD.

My face turns as hot as the sun as I pray for a sinkhole to open at my feet.

“I—I—”

“The meeting is about to start.”

He lets his lips curl slightly, giving me the faintest flash of white teeth. Then, without blinking, he starts to move past where I'm still glued to the sidewalk.

He pauses right next to me, and my breath sucks in as he leans down, so close I can smell the woodsy, elegant scent of his cologne and feel the heat of his breath in my ear.

"Oh, and Neve…" he growls quietly. "Peach isn't your color."

My brows knit as I start to turn towards him in confusion.

"I'm not wearing—"

Oh God.

Yes, I am.

My mind flashes back to rooting around in my light-filled bedroom as I yanked off my hoodie and sweatpants. Where I pulled out the green top and black jeans…

After putting on the laundry-day pair of peach-colored panties.

I'm not the only person spying on their neighbor.

Son of a bitch.

Ares clears his throat, straightening up and buttoning his jacket as I melt into a puddle of mortification.

"See you in there, princess."

Chapter 2
Ares

Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown.

Everyone knows that. Except kings usually know they're going to *be* kings long before they take over the throne. They prepare for it their whole lives, train for it. They're ready when the day arrives.

I wasn't. Because I was never *meant* to be king. I'm Lancelot, burning and pillaging and fucking his way through the countryside. *Not* King fucking Arthur.

But life, or fate, or karma, or whatever you want to call it, had other plans for me.

Nine months ago, my father Aeneas, the head of the entire Drakos Family, died at the hands of my older brother, Atlas. My father was a hard, brutal man. But Atlas was unhinged. And power-hungry.

Not to mention a knuckle-dragging fucking idiot.

His "reign" lasted less than three weeks. Then he was killed waging a pointless war against a man with deep pockets and dangerous friends, all over a woman.

It's an absurd story. Years and years ago, Atlas had once been betrothed to this woman's mother, Saoirse —an Irish Mafia princess and Cillian Kildare's sister. But Saoirse ended up having a fling with someone else, producing a daughter, Rose—who went on to end up with this man with the deep pockets and dangerous friends.

Atlas decided the daughter of the bride he'd been cheated out of should be his. Obviously, the man with whom she lived and shared a bed disagreed. And when the dust had settled, my brother was dead, and I was king in his place.

Sometimes I'm convinced life really is a Greek tragedy.

Or a comedy, depending on how cynical you are.

But, heavy as the burden to lead is, I was born for this. All my siblings and I were. Living under our father's rule may have been a lesson in brutality and viciousness, but it hardened us. It prepared us to lead and to conquer. When I took the throne that was unexpectedly thrust upon me, I was ready.

And then, of course, life threw me another curveball.

My siblings and I were all born here in New York. But my father ultimately preferred England, where he'd grown up. So that's where the real seat of the

Drakos empire was for the last twelve years, while my uncle Vasilis oversaw our operations back here in New York City.

Until four months ago, when, as I say, the proverbial shit hit the proverbial fan.

Our family and the Irish Kildare family have never gotten along. There's generations of bad blood between us, going back who even remembers how long. At one point, there was at least a half-truce—when Saoirse was promised to Atlas. And even when that marriage fell through, things at least cooled off between our families for the next twenty years or so.

Until things went sideways, *badly*.

I've heard it started as a potential peace agreement. Vasilis sat down with Declan Kildare, Cillian's half-brother and the head of Kildare operations here in New York. But whatever "peace" they were trying to hammer out shattered when a gunfight broke out between them, killing them both.

It should mean all-out war. A bloodbath in the streets. The final showdown between the Kildare and Drakos families until only one is left standing.

Luckily, neither Cillian nor I is suicidal.

Cillian *is* a fucking psychopath, there's no question about that. He's been described more than once as the kind of man who wants to watch the world burn because he enjoys the smell of the smoke. And I think that's a fair assessment. But either out of self-interest or greed, we've managed to work out an arrangement.

It's time to settle this bullshit between our families once and for all.

And the key to settling it is currently glaring daggers at me from across the room. Clearly, nobody's told her yet. But she's it.

We're it.

My eyes narrow, my mouth tightening to a line as I let my gaze drag across the scowl on Neve Kildare's face.

It makes sense that she hates me. Even if neither of us had anything to do with the violence of a few months ago, at the end of the day, my uncle and

her father killed each other. From what I gather, neither she nor her sister Eilish was very close with Declan.

But still. Blood is blood.

And soon, *we'll* be blood.

Joined.

Bound together forever.

My jaw grinds as my mind flashes to other more literal ways I could bind the stunning and furious-looking redhead across the table from me.

My tempting, sinfully attractive neighbor who *really* ought to have some curtains put up in her bedroom.

The one who's been spying on me. The one *I've* been spying on right back. I'm just much better at it than she is.

Desire makes my cock swell as my mind flashes back to earlier today. When I was standing in my kitchen rinsing out my coffee cup, staring through the windows above my sink…

Into her *bedroom*. Where I watched her strip off her sweatpants and hoodie and prowl naked around her disaster of a room until she found some other clothes to pull on—

"You realize she's going to bite your dick off the first chance she gets, right?"

My jaw grinds and my train of thought is interrupted as I glance sideways at my younger brother, Hades, sitting next to me on our side of the conference table.

When we were kids, I used to roll my eyes at the way our father named all of us after Greek gods, titans, and muses—Atlas, Ares, Hades, Deimos, Kratos, and our sister, Calliope. But as we've gotten older, we've all weirdly grown into the mythological figures we were named for. Hades especially.

There’s a darkness and an edge in all of us—our father made damn sure of that with his heavy hand and strict discipline. But Hades—named for the god of the dead, the king of the underworld—always seems to revel in it. The sadistically sociopathic glint I can currently see in his eyes is a testament to that darkness.

He shrugs at my cold silence.

“You know I’m right.”

“What I know is this is neither the time nor the place, Hades,” I grunt back.

My brother shrugs again, pushing his longish hair back from his face. He got our mother’s piercing ice-blue eyes. I got our father’s dark, brooding ones.

Behind him and towering above all of us despite being younger than Hades and me, Kratos mimics my stern glare at our brother.

“It’s a good arrangement,” he rumbles in that mountainous way of his.

I nod to my brother. Kratos is a good, steady voice of reason. Though Deimos, who’s holding down the fort back in London, is the true peacekeeper of all of us siblings.

A peacekeeper in the style of a nuclear deterrent, that is, not Gandhi.

“Oh, I agree,” Hades smiles brittly. “It’s good for peace and will bring an end to bloodshed. I mean, it’s not *my* cock that’s going to get chewed off.”

“Could you *attempt* to not be a dick for just two minutes, Hades?”

I turn to smirk quietly at Calliope, my sharp-tongued little sister, sitting on my other side. The youngest and smallest of all of us, and yet somehow, she’s the law-keeper. She’s got our grandmother Dimitra’s genes.

Across the room, the group of Kildare men who’ve been talking quietly amongst themselves finally come find seats at the table. Cillian and I catch each other’s eyes, and we nod.

This wasn’t his idea, or mine. It was Dimitra who first put it forward: a way to put the hostilities between our families and our subsidiaries behind us for

good. As she pointed out, the closest we've ever gotten to peace before was when Atlas was set to marry Saoirse.

What better way to settle our differences than by becoming family?

But when I glance at Neve sitting across the table, still glaring pure malice at me, it's clear her uncle still hasn't told her what's about to happen.

This should be interesting.

Cillian clears his throat, sitting back in his seat as his green eyes slice across the room, silencing it with a look.

"I'm not one for fancy speeches, so I'll get straight to it. We're here because the hostilities between our organizations have reached an untenable level. Rivalries are one thing. But we've crossed too many lines, and there's too much blood in the streets."

He pulls a silver cigarette case out of his breast pocket, opens it, slips one between his lips, and lights it deftly with a flick of a silver Zippo. Smoke curls around the Irishman's head as his glinting green eyes pierce through it.

"I'm not going to get all weepy and sentimental. The truth is, the reason all of us are here is that war will mean ruin to both the Kildare and Drakos families. It will destroy our business interests. And there are already enough jackals circling, waiting for the first sign of weakness to strike. The Bolinaro Cartel. The Carveli Family. The Reznikov Bratva, not to mention their allies."

Cillian's icy gaze lands on me.

I don't blink.

"So in the interest of *not* getting hit from behind by an enemy while we bicker like schoolboys, Ares and I have come to an arrangement—one that will end these hostilities forever, and make both of our families stronger than ever as a united front."

I watch Neve's face scrunch up in confusion as she turns to frown at her uncle.

Oh, this is about to get good.

“A *united* front?”

Goddamnit, Ezio.

I frown quietly as I lean forward, turning to stab my gaze down the length of the table to where Ezio Adamos is glaring daggers at Cillian.

“Please, *go on* about this fucking *united* front we’re supposed to have with—”

“Ezio.”

My voice is neither raised nor very forceful. But it cuts through the room all the same, quickly silencing him. He stares at me, fury and pain boiling behind his eyes.

The Adamos family is a subsidiary, tributary family to ours. Their allegiance has been pledged to the Drakos family for generations, and the way I can see Ezio about to suicide bomb this entire discussion has my jaw grinding harshly.

But I get it. And I feel for him.

Ezio’s only son, Jason, was at the meeting where Vasilis Drakos and Declan Kildare opened fire.

He was also killed.

“Ares, *please*,” he hisses at me, pain glinting in his eyes. “You cannot seriously be considering allying ourselves with these backstabbing, honorless *Micks*—”

“*Be silent*,” I snap.

I’m not completely heartless. I understand he’s in pain. But this is decidedly *not* the place for it. Or the time for him to start hurling slurs.

Cillian clears his throat, eying Ezio across the table.

“What would…*ease* your grief?”

Fuck.

This isn’t Cillian being diplomatic.

This is him going for the throat, and Ezio’s about to walk right into his trap.

“What would *ease my fucking grief*?!” He snaps at the Irishman.

“I don’t believe I stuttered, Mr. Adamos. What’s the going rate on grief these days? Ten thousand? Twenty?”

Goddammit.

Ezio lurches to his feet, his face a mask of seething rage as he whips his head around to glare at me.

“This is insulting! I will *not* sit here—”

“Yes, you will.” My gaze hardens on him.

I’ll tell him again how sorry I am for his loss later. Not here.

“You. *Will*.”

His mouth thins to a line as he points a finger across the table at Cillian.

“This piece of shit *dares* to offer me *money*?! I lost a SON, Ares!”

“And I lost a fucking *brother*,” Cillian snaps coldly. “But here we are. And you can either get on board, or go find a nice length of rope somewhere and join your boy.”

Yeah, they’re not exaggerating when they call Cillian a sadistic sociopath.

The room goes silent. Ezio’s face turns purple. He looks like he’s seriously considering jumping across the table and murdering Cillian with his bare hands. But instead, he spins on his heel, glares at me viciously, and storms from the room.

“*Well, I have to say. This is TWICE as much fun as I imagined it would be*,” Hades mutters next to me.

Cillian sighs, drumming his fingers on the table as his gaze drags back to me.

“You need to keep your dogs on a tighter leash.”

“He’ll keep to the truce,” I growl back.

My eyes swivel to Neve again, drinking in her fiery red hair, the dusting of freckles across her nose, and the sharp green eyes so like her uncle’s, still squinting in confusion.

“And you?” I murmur, pulling my gaze from Neve to Cillian. “You’ll keep to our agreement?”

He takes a long, slow drag of his cigarette, and then nods slowly.

“We will.”

He turns to his niece, and my eyes lock onto her as well.

“Neve,” Cillian sighs. “There’s no easy way to say this. And if there was any other way…” he shrugs. “But there isn’t. Not one that doesn’t end in more blood.”

Her brow furrows deeper.

“Uncle, what are you talking about? And why am I—”

“You’re going to marry Ares Drakos, Neve. That will be the final truce to forever end this bullshit between our families.”

The room goes *silent*. Neve’s face turns white as she stares dumbfounded at her uncle. She blinks, frowning as if willing him to laugh at the spectacular joke he’s just made.

But this is no joke.

This is happening. And as reluctant and unhappy as *I* am about it, I’m guessing from the look of horror that spreads across her face that she’s twice as reluctant and unhappy.

“*What*?!”

Cillian takes one last pull from his smoke, exhaling toward the ceiling before dropping the butt in the mug of coffee in front of him.

“It’s the only way, Neve. You’re going to marry Ares, and that’s final.”

She blinks, shaking as her mouth forms silent words, none getting out.

“No—”

“I’m afraid this isn’t a discussion, Neve,” he says quietly, a flicker of regret and rare-for-Cillian apology on his face.

“Like hell it’s—!”

“*Neve*,” he growls thickly. “It’s. Been. Decided.”

Slowly, her face pale as a ghost, Neve turns to let her fierce green eyes stab into mine like knives.

I stare right back.

My little peeping Tom of a neighbor.

My enemy.

My wife.

“I think you’ll find, Neve, this is the best way to settle all of the bad blood—”

“And I think *you’ll* find yourself, *Ares*, with a knife in your throat if you come anywhere fucking near me.”

She stands abruptly, her eyes wild with fear and anger.

“Neve,” Cillian hisses quietly. “It’s *done*—”

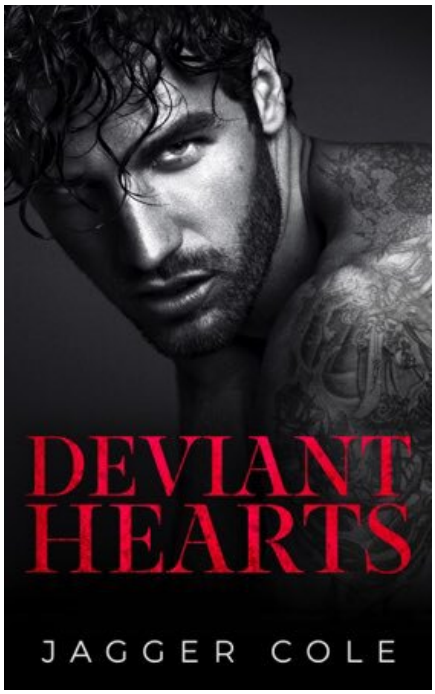
“Oh, we’re done, all right.”

Without another word, she whirls, storms to the conference room doors, and blows right through them.

Shit.

“So,” Hades sighs, his voice dripping with amusement. “You ready to discuss body armor for your dick yet, or do you wanna talk bachelor party?”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at
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